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The Exceptionalism of the Avengers: 9/11 Representations, Security and Manicheanism

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Summary

This thesis asks as the research question: "How do the four Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism?" The four movies analyzed are *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). There are three hypotheses to answer the research question: firstly, in terms of representations of 9/11 (by representations we intend references and aesthetic), secondly in terms of security and thirdly in terms of Manicheanism. To conduct this analysis, the thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter starts by showing that the study of popular culture is relevant in the fields of political science and international relations. It then presents how visual representation impacts the audiences and vehiculates messages through images. Finally, the last section of this chapter explains the choice of constructivism as the theoretical approach. Constructivism allows to understand how identities are created by ideas and, in turn, how it shapes actions, behaviors and discourses. This approach is, firstly, used to understand how the identity of the six superheroes analyzed (Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Hawkeye and Black Widow), was constructed in connection with the U.S. administrations' actions, behaviors and discourses and how it is portrayed in the four movies. Secondly, it permits to comprehend how, through concepts such as the American Utopia, the American Dream or the American myth, the American identity was built around the concept of American exceptionalism.

The second chapter analyzes the history, portrayal after 9/11 and notion of justice of both superheroes and American exceptionalism. The second chapter showed that there are a lot of parallels that can be made between the two concepts, notably in terms of 9/11 representations, conception of insecurity and Manicheanism.

Finally, the third chapter first analyzes the construction of the identity of each one of the six Avengers before conducting the analysis of the four movies. The last chapter validates the first hypothesis (about the representations of 9/11) in the first two movies, but only partially for the two next ones. The second hypothesis (about security) is validated in all movies but not validated in *Avengers: Infinity War.* The third hypothesis (about Manicheanism) is validated in all four movies.

The conclusion is that the four Avengers movies do reflect American exceptionalism, *Avengers: Infinity War* being less relevant because it displays less elements of American exceptionalism.

Introduction

This research project was inspired by the current trend of superhero movies and TV shows. Actually, it was inspired by the increasing production of movie and TV shows in general. The fact is that the future will witness an exponential production of movies and tv shows because of a simple thing: automatization. Take for instance self-driven cars: it will mean that audiences will have even more time on their hands to watch Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube, Apple + or even Facebook productions. Yes, even Facebook. All the GAFA companies understood that there is a big market for visual production and we can now see the trailers for their new (big budget) productions. This demand from audiences can already be seen in public transports: it has become rare to see someone reading a newspaper while it has become ordinary to see someone watching a show on their smartphone.

Superhero movies and TV shows in particular have witnessed a boom ever since the beginning of the 21st century, which also corresponds to one of the most (if not THE most) traumatic event in American history: 9/11. So, this raises a question in the fields of political science and international relations: does popular culture interact with these fields and, if they do, how do they interact with these fields? Furthermore, popular culture is, today, mostly consumed through visual representation (music is also, often, accompanied by video clips). The question is, therefore: does visual representation have an impact on the public? Both these questions will be addressed in the first chapter as well as the choice of the theoretical approach for this thesis: constructivism. The idea for this choice stems from the two main topics of this research: American exceptionalism and superheroes. Constructivism, by trying to understand how ideas form identities, allows for an empirical and interpretive analysis of how these identities shape actions, behaviors and discourses. In the case of American exceptionalism, this will permit to comprehend how concepts such as the American Myth, the American Utopia or the American Dream built American identities and therefore how these identities modulated actions, behaviors and discourses after 9/11. In the case of superheroes (the Avengers in particular), constructivism will allow first of all to understand the context in which they were imagined and conceived and then to see how their identity determined how they behaved in the Avenger movies. To conduct this analysis, the primary source will, then, be the Avengers movies which will be completed with a qualitative content analysis.

The objective of the second chapter, then, will be to dive into the history, the portrayal after 9/11 and the relation with law and justice of both American exceptionalism and superheroes. By mirroring the sections of both American exceptionalism and superheroes, the second chapter will draw a parallel between the two notions to see how they can interact. The concept of superhero will use the definition of Peter Coogan:

> *A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. – superheroic, adj. Also super hero, super-hero.*[1]

The concept of American exceptionalism will use the definition of Robert Patman, which sees American exceptionalism as a belief in the:

> *pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles, and also with the conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations. The founders of America saw the country as a new form of political community, dedicated to the Enlightenment principles of the rule of law, private property, representative government, freedom of speech and religion, and commercial liberty. This creed is so taken for granted that it is now synonymous with 'the American way of life'.*[2]

Both definitions will be used again in the sections dedicated to them for more visibility. The case-study will be developed in the third chapter to answer the research question of this thesis: "How do the four Avengers movies reflect American Exceptionalism?" The four movies were released respectively in 2012 (*The Avengers*), 2015 (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*), 2018

[1] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, (Monkey Brain Books, 2006).
[2] Robert G. Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 964.

(*Avengers: Infinity War*) and 2019 (*Avengers: Endgame)* and are all among the ten most successful movies of all times, which justifies to analyze the structure of these money-machine blockbusters. To this research question, there are three main hypotheses: the first one argues that the Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism in terms of representations of 9/11. By representations of 9/11, we intend both references to the event and the aesthetic associated with it. The second hypothesis suggests that the Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism in terms of security. Finally, the third hypothesis proposes that the Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism in terms of Manichean narratives.

The originality of this research can be identified in four main points. First of all, there is no in-depth literature that analyzes the link between American exceptionalism and superheroes. In the literature analyzed for this thesis, the link between the two concepts was usually vague or very specific (to one specific movie or to a specific behavior). Therefore, by analyzing in details both American exceptionalism and superheroes and how it is relevant for the case-study, this thesis will stand apart. Secondly, there is very little literature between superheroes and international law. Superheroes are usually analyzed through their identities, their use of morality or their practice of substantive justice. Analyzing how superheroes and international law interact will therefore dive deeper into the subject. Thirdly, while there has been more and more literature on pop culture and superheroes after the Cold War in the United States, there is still very little in Europe. Being of both the Free University of Brussels and of the LUISS university in Rome, we hope to further a topic that we believe has had a lot of impact and is having more and more importance in our bathed-in-pop culture globalized society. Lastly, and probably more importantly, while there is quite a lot of literature on the first Avengers movie (*The Avengers, 2012*), there is little to none on the three other Avengers movies. The two last ones, in particular, were released in 2018 and 2019 which justifies the absence of literature, and this thesis will try to fill that void.

Before diving into thesis, one last warning: spoilers ahead.

Chapter I - Popular Culture and "Spectacle"

Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is the most successful franchise of all times. With 28 movies and counting, starting in 2008 with the release of the first *Iron Man*, the franchise leaves far behind benchmarks such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or even *James Bond*. But the super hero blockbuster success did not start with the Marvel Cinematic Universe: *Spider Man 2*, released in 2004, rose to be the fifth highest grossing movie of all time[3] and with the release of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy with its first instalment in 2005, the film industry (and the American one in particular) has ever since seen a very important surge in super hero movies.[4] Between 1978 and 2015, more than a hundred super hero movies were released, more than a third of them in the 10 years following 9/11 and between Marvel and DC Comics, dozens more are bound to be released by 2022. The super hero movie industry is extremely profitable: if we analyze the top 10 movies with the highest gross of all times, we can see that four of them are part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (they are, in fact, the four *Avengers* movies), the newly released *Avengers: Endgame* even grabbing the first spot with a staggering $2,796 billion.[5] Moreover, the 2019 Forbes magazine published the ranking of the highest paid actors in Hollywood, which includes five actors (namely Chris Evans, Paul Rudd, Robert Downey Jr, Chris Hemsworth and Bradley Cooper)[6] from the *Avengers: Endgame* movie while Scarlett Johansson (an *Avenger* as well) takes the first spot as the highest paid actress.[7]

This success puts back on the table of international relations a field that was long ignored: popular culture. It is only recently that popular culture started being truly analyzed in international relations, political science and international law, even though there is still a long way to go: popular culture was often seen as "not serious" and not a real source of academic content. Authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Saunders, Kyle Grayson or Simon Philpott,

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[3] Jeanne Holland, "It's Complicated: Spider-Man 2's Reinscription of "Good" and "Evil" in Post-9/11 America", *The Journal of American Culture 35, Issue 4* (Dec. 2012): 289.
[4] James Mulder, “Believe It or Not, This is Power: Embodied Crisis and the Superhero on Film", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50 (2017): 1047.
[5] "Worldwide Gross," All Time Box Office, Box Office Mojo, accessed August 22, 2019, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/
[6] "The Highest-Paid Actors 2019: Dwayne Johnson, Bradley Cooper and Chris Hemsworth", Forbes, accessed August 24, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2019/08/21/the-highest-paid-actors-2019-dwayne-johnson-bradley-cooper-and-chris-hemsworth/#3116344c2b96
[7] "The Highest-Paid Actresses 2019: Scarlett Johansson Leads with $56 Million", Forbes, accessed August 24, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2019/08/23/highest-paid-actresses-scarlett-johansson/#4606265b4b4d

however realized that these fields and popular culture could not be dissociated.[8] Saunders, for instance, said that "cultural production is an important part of how international relations is conceived"[9] and Grayson added that "popular culture makes world politics what it is".[10] A second essential point is the importance of the visual aspect, of what Guy Debord called the "spectacle", that "extreme, visual-oriented and calculative mode of representation, fundamental to the West but consummated in the democratic capitalism of the modern age, that, in substituting the "simulacral" image for temporal worldly reality, has as it's essential purpose to strike [the spectator] dumb."[11]

That is why the first part of this chapter will focus on both the interaction between popular culture and international relations as well as the importance of visual representation today, while the second part of the chapter will focus on the constructivist theoretical approach of the research.

1. Popular Culture and International Relations

> *Popular culture, then, is political in the most fundamental sense: it creates and entrenches a politics of identity representations of who 'we' are engender an emotional response that reinforces a narrative of national togetherness. How we feel about being part of a greater political community, even if we cannot possibly know every single person in it, is both contingent upon and reflected by the images we hold of ourselves and of those around us. Movies and television shows and even television advertising campaigns play an important role in presenting identity such that we feel happiness, pride, and even love for our nation.*[12]

[8] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018)

[9] Robert A. Saunders. "'The Interview' and the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum." E-International Relations (December 23, 2014), accessed August 22, 2019. http://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/23/situating-the-interview-within-the-popular-culture-world-politics-continuum/.

[10] Kyle Grayson, "The Rise of Popular Culture in IR: Three Issues", E-International Relations (January 30, 2015), accessed August 22, 2019. http://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/30/the-rise-of-popular-culture-in-ir-three-issues/#.

[11] William V. Spanos, *Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum: An Untimely Meditation on the American Vocation,* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

[12] Constance Duncombe and Roland Bleiker, "Popular Culture and Political Identity" in *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies,* ed. Caso and Hamilton, (E-International Publishing, 2015): 37.

Nexon and Neumann, in a book focusing on the world of *Harry Potter* and world politics, identified four ways through which popular culture was interacting with international politics. Firstly, it can interact as a consequence or as a source of international relations. Secondly, as a way to shed a light on different concepts in international relations that can help in communicating ideas. Thirdly, popular culture can exist as a data source about cultural beliefs, values and mentalities in a given context. Finally, it can act as an entity that actually creates norms, concepts, ideas linked to international politics.[13] For this thesis, it is mostly the first point that is applicable, and we argue that international relations are a source of inspiration for the Marvel Cinematic Universe's movies that are analyzed in this research (although the three other points described by Nexon and Neumann can also be observed, even if in a soberer fashion). Two examples can be given to show this interaction between popular culture and international relations. The first one regards Ronald Reagan and his *Star Wars* comment in 1983 (the year of the release of *Return of the Jedi*, the last installment of the *Star Wars* trilogy) about the Soviet Union, comparing the latter to an "evil empire", with a rhetoric filled with references to "freedom", "forces of evil" and, to top it all, the Strategic Defense Initiative (which concerned a space-based weapon system) was called "star wars".[14] A second example is attributed to George W. Bush when he landed on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier in May 2003, which was then identified by the observers as a clear reference to the movie *Top Gun* (the movie was portrayed as a geopolitical response against the humiliation of the Vietnam War, and movies such as these where a new G.I. Joe-like generation was fighting in foreign and exotic lands performed as a redemptive tool). This staged arrival by the then president (which corresponded with peak TV hours) was a way for him to announce that the military operations in Iraq were over and, to top it all, a banner that read "mission accomplished" was attached to the control tower of the carrier.[15]

Popular culture "has never been an innocent domain of simple entertainments divorced from the concerns of so-called politics".[16] This statement should be seen as a given, but entertainment and popular culture in particular were not seen as a serious source of academic research for a rather long time (it is mostly after the Cold War that pop culture started being of

[13] Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, "Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics" in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, ed. Neumann and Nexon, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006): 6-23.
[14] Klaus Dodds, "Popular Geopolitics and War on Terror" in *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies,* ed. Caso and Hamilton, (E-International Publishing, 2015): 52.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, "Militarization and Popular Culture" in *The Marketing of War in the Age of Neo-Militarism,* ed. Kosta Gouliamos, (Routledge, 2013).

interest to part of the academic community). This is especially true for superheroes which, according to Knowles, are a "highly charged laboratory for pop culture"[17] and this is not only the case for comic books and movies, but also toys, TV shows, video games, clothing or even cereal boxes. Through TV shows such as *Stranger Things, The Big Bang Theory* or *The Boys,* the "geek generation" truly got its revenge on the jocks.[18] Even the last movie from Steven Spielberg, *Ready Player One,* is a love letter to the pop culture community. It is common today to have high school kids arguing about which one is the strongest among the *Avengers*, a proof if one was needed that they are actually part of our everyday life. Andrew Martin goes further by saying that popular culture became a "crucial element in the construction of modern regimes of knowledge and perception, behavior and identity"[19] and its narrative also has a notable importance in the public attitudes.[20] Furthermore, it serves the purpose of "informing the people about the world, and making an inherently chaotic political universe comprehensible. If influence scales with audience size, such sources may produce impacts orders of magnitude greater than expert judgements about the world."[21] Popular culture, however, has to be seen as a platform through which values, perceptions, politics can be engraved. It is a vessel made of freedom of expression that reflects ideas which ultimately "delimits and locates politics in a reified realm ratified by the state and interstate system and denies the politics of the complex of social forces expressed through and lived in popular culture."[22]

The latter is often known as "mass culture", and includes a wide array of art forms, going from popular music to soap operas and blockbusters. Furthermore, it constitutes a certain set of references shared on a global scale, whether it is beliefs, practices or objects. Karin Kukkonen defines this common set of references as a cultural memory with "mental representations which can be related to a particular community and their attitudes and

[17] Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*, (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007): 215.
[18] Reference to the movie *Revenge of the Nerds* by Jeff Kanew, released in 1984.
[19] Andrew Martin, *Rethinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the "War on Terror",* (Rutgers University Press, 2006).
[20] Margaret Andersen and Howard Francis Taylor, *Sociology: The Essentials,* (Singapore: Cengage Learning, 2006).
[21] Daniel J. Furman and Paul Musgrave, "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations", *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (2017): 503-504.
[22] Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, "Militarization and Popular Culture" in *The Marketing of War in the Age of Neo-Militarism,* ed. Kosta Gouliamos, (Routledge, 2013): 55.

ideologies."[23] Mervi Miettinen adds that "popular culture's relevance to this process is further enhanced when approaching popular culture's unique role as an easily consumed artifact."[24] However, it is seen as what Ninhchuan Wang calls a "low-data" source: what it means is that, compared to academic sources, speeches of policy makers or statistics, popular culture is usually associated to "mere entertainment".[25] It would of course be complicated to define what "hard data" is exactly, but it is certain that pop culture does not belong to elite culture. Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley observed several kinds of ways (six, to be precise but only three will be retained as relevant for this thesis) in which popular culture has been interacting with world politics and international relations. The first one is the state's use of popular culture: Weldes and Rowley describe how the U.S. used popular culture as a tool to promote their agenda, using the examples of propaganda through posters or other medias, for instance during the Red Scare (see Annex - 1) or movies such as *Casablanca* (1942) which had been backed by the U.S. department of War through its "War Films" division.[26] A second way is its industrial form: popular culture is, in fact, a product of consumerism and it has "already enmeshed in both the International Political Economy disciplinary landscape and the fabric of international political economic practices."[27] The authors Constance Duncombe and Roland Bleiker argue furthermore that "popular culture has political power precisely because it is so closely intertwined with consumerism."[28] The best possible way to verify this observation is through product placement: if we use the example of the *Avengers* movies, we have long shots of Acura cars in *The Avengers,* the same with Audi cars, Beats by Dre headphones and Adidas shoes in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and Ben & Jerry ice-cream eaten by Hulk in *Avengers: Endgame.* On this note, Jason Dittmer warns about the dangers of too easily associating popular culture and geopolitics, ignoring the importance of the culture economy on the way and, specifically, of the superhero genre which: "proliferates not by the intervention of the Bush administration or by the role of specific auteur-directors pushing political agendas, but instead

[23] Karin Kukkonen, *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism: Fables and the Fairy Tale,* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2010): 123.
[24] Mervi Miettinen, "Superhero Comics and the Popular Geopolitics of American Identity" (PhD diss., University of Tampere, March 2011): 50..
[25] Ningchuan Wang, " The Currency of Fantasy: Discourses of Popular Culture In International Relations", *Interdisciplinary Political And Cultural Journal* Vol. 15, No. 1 (2013): 22-23.
[26] Jutta Weldes And Christina Rowley, "How *Does* Popular Culture Relate to World Politics?" in *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies,* ed. Caso and Hamilton, (E-International Publishing, 2015): 13.
[27] Ibid, 15.
[28] Constance Duncombe and Roland Bleiker, "Popular Culture and Political Identity" in *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies,* ed. Caso and Hamilton, (E-International Publishing, 2015): 37.

largely by studio economics and financing."[29] This is however not what can mostly be observed in the literature on the subject and it is also not the target of this thesis: most of the literature on the subject actually defends that because of the trauma caused by 9/11, popular culture was necessarily influenced and the art forms produced after (whether it was movies, TV shows or comics), baring a lot of resemblance with the actual events and actions taken by the Bush administration, had to be seen as a mere reflection of these events, and this is what will be defended in this thesis.

Going back to Weldes and Rowley, the third way they identified lies in the "contested flows, practices and processes of [...] homogenization (whether understood as Americanization, Westernization, or modernization), hybridization, cultural imperialism or globalization."[30] This point is particularly interesting in our case because this is partly what American exceptionalism rests on in terms of soft power, since for most people these particular concepts are experienced through a globalized culture. Furthermore, these flows also permitted the diffusion of English as the most spoken language on the planet (it was facilitated, after the hegemony of French, by British colonialism and U.S. imperialism).[31]

The authors Daniel Furman and Paul Musgrave went even further in their rhetoric about the importance of popular culture by theorizing the concept of "synthetic experiences":

> *which can be produced by narratives, fragments of a story, descriptions of a place, impressions of a culture, dramatized portrayals about "real" processes, or illustrations of a strategy's consequences—affect how people interact with the real world through pathways similar to memories and knowledge derived from textbooks or data analyses. They encode information in ways that affect judgment and can even displace factual information through other sources because narratives allow for the portrayal of unrealistic or unprecedented events as being naturalized. They thereby enable fictional sources to influence world politics not because the fictions serve as a delivery mechanism for factual content but because they prompt the inward experience of a fictional reality.* [32]

[29] Jason Dittmer, "American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom", *Environment and Planning-Part D* 29 (2011): 127.
[30] Jutta Weldes And Christina Rowley, "How *Does* Popular Culture Relate to World Politics?" in *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies,* ed. Caso and Hamilton, (E-International Publishing, 2015): 17.
[31] Ibid, 18.
[32] Daniel J. Furman and Paul Musgrave, "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations", *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (2017): 506.

The two authors argue that we tend to ignore the importance of popular culture on audiences, while we tend to overestimate the influence of "canonical academic sources", and that pop culture should be taken more seriously when it comes to interpreting international relations.[33] Their claim is that their concept affects everyone consuming fiction, influencing the audiences and informing them about "the characteristics of actors in international relations, issues important to global politics, and expectations about outcomes of strategies."[34] Even if the theory proposed by the two authors is quite bold, it raises questions as to how popular culture should not only be used as a serious source for international relations but even to how it could actually influence its audiences, whether it is mass or elite audiences. Furthermore, this also raises the question of the importance of visual representation today as well as what Guy Debord defined as "The Spectacle". As Constance Duncombe and Roland Bleiker observed, "the co-constituted relationship between popular culture and political identity hinges on two particularly crucial features: the powerful visual dimensions of film and television, and the inherently emotional reactions they trigger. Popular culture is, to a large degree, visual degree, and it has a strong affective component that arises through people's experiences of positive and negative representations of their identity."[35]

2. Film and the "Spectacle"

> *Where the real-world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior. The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. But the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing, even combined with hearing. It is that which escapes the activity of men, that which escapes*

[33] Daniel J. Furman and Paul Musgrave, "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations", *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (2017): 503-504.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Constance Duncombe and Roland Bleiker, "Popular Culture and Political Identity" in *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies,* ed. Caso and Hamilton, (E-International Publishing, 2015): 42.

reconsideration and correction by their work. It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself.[36]

The "spectacle" has emerged triumphant today, according to Giorgio Agamben.[37] Guy Debord defines this concept as being more than a mere collection of images, but rather a "social relation among people, meditated by images."[38] It is a result of the current mode of production (it was the case in 1967 and, as Giorgio Agamben analyzed in his book *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, it is more than ever the case today) and Debord projects it at "the heart of the unrealism of the real society". Whether it is through information, advertisement or direct entertainment, Debord argues that the spectacle is dominant in the model of our modern society, and it "aims at nothing other than itself."[39] As for the concept of "synthetic experiences" coined by the authors Daniel Furman and Paul Musgrave, Guy Debord's theory serves more as an idea of to what extent some theories can go in terms of the influence of popular culture and entertainment today and serves as a reference for the potential of visual representation, and will be used as such in this thesis. What is certain is that between these theories and Roland Barthes' theory that all images are polysemous,[40] it becomes certain that the visual aspect of the interaction between an audience and popular culture is important enough to be seriously considered.

The "spectacle" is very applicable to the concept of blockbuster. Because of the huge use made by Hollywood of blockbusters, it makes it an interesting object to analyze as such. As Lori Ann Crowe ironically observes, the term originally described "an aerial bomb that could take out an entire city block and is used today to identify movies that primarily attain masse market financial success by earning substantially more than the production budget, thus generating a substantial profit."[41] Blockbusters are today a perfect match for superheroes and Hollywood is "the most powerful institution involved in its production, distribution and consumption."[42] Henry Jenkins argues that this monopolization (the Walt Disney Company is a very obvious example, since it now owns Marvel, Star Wars and Pixar) and franchising is

[36] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Detroit: Red and Black, 1977): para. 18.
[37] Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics,* trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
[38] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Detroit: Red and Black, 1977): para. 4.
[39] Ibid, paras. 6-14.
[40] Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Hill and Wang, 1964): 37-38.
[41] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 16.
[42] Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, (Routledge, 2014): 152.

made so that distribution and content creation can be synergized in what he calls a "horizontal integration" between the different divisions, destined to create strategies which will engage audiences in a fidelity process with the help of many partners involving fast-food companies or soft drink bottlers in order to "exploit and enlarge public interest."[43] Aida Hozic warns about Hollywood "industry of desire's" use of zones of consumption, production and representation which "materialize the illusions of societal control and pleasure that could never have been realized in other industrial sectors or in American economy in general. As such, they do not just express the unattainable social ideals or repressed fears: they actively (some would say forcefully) construct the world which they claim to evade"[44] Obviously, these enterprises could not be analyzed without including the financial aspect of it. Blockbusters are Hollywood's "money machines" and it is in the interest of big production companies to take care of every single aspect of the production process (and by trying to milk the cow in such a way, they have faced several problems, notably with the writers going on strike in 2012 and 2019 as well as the current crisis between Marvel and Sony, with Marvel trying to get back its rights to the *Spider Man* character). The huge investment that a blockbuster requires (the movie *Avengers: Endgame* movie had a production cost of $356 million which, again, seems like a pale figure when confronted to its $2.796 billion earnings) needs, by definition, to gain a worldwide appeal as well as an exponential return on investment.

But to understand the appeal for blockbusters, it is important to understand the appeal for movies. The act of going to a movie theater instead of reading a small sized comic book (it is worth mentioning that in France and Belgium, in particular, the comic books - called *bandes dessinées* - have a hard cover and are bigger than the usual Marvel comic book, for instance, which allows for a better immersion) provides an experience that can only be compared to a *spectacle* as well as mobilizing another sense: the sense of hearing. Will Eisner defined comic books as the principal application of the sequential art on the paper support[45] and Sergei Eisenstein, the famous Russian film maker, even went further when he, in the early 20th century, revolutionized cinema with his use of editing. This also led him to say that the one factor that makes cinema unique is, in fact, editing. Movies, as for superheroes, have always been closely linked to the socio-cultural and political environments, and film makers tap

[43] Henry Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture" in *Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Blackwell Publishing, 2001): 552-554.
[44] Aida Hozic, *Hollyworld: Space, Power, and Fantasy in the American Economy,* (Ithaca-New York: Cornell University Press, 2001): 30.
[45] Will Eisner, *Le Récit Graphique: Narration et Bande Dessinée,* (Vertige Graphic, 2002).

directly into that pool to find their inspiration. This medium allowed for scholars to engage with representations of their environment which allows to "unpack their politics"[46] and by "accessing visual culture, through popular films, allows us to consider the connections between IR (International Relations) theory and our everyday lives. Using popular films in this way helps us get a sense of everyday connections between the 'popular' and the 'political'"[47]

When we think about movies linked to politics, however, the super hero genre is not the first to come to mind. We would usually think about movies about specific political events or personalities, war movies or in general military movies. Hasian Marouf, in his article about the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* by Kathryn Bigalow (which underlines the key moments of the operations that led to the execution of Osama Bin Laden through the eyes of a specific CIA operative), argues that 9/11 left us with a "mass-mediated production that allows U.S. audiences to celebrate their views on American exceptionalism."[48] Movies such as *Zero Dark Thirty* have often been the source of much criticism because of their polysemous effect justifying some unlawful or doubtful actions by the U.S. government (movies such as *American Sniper* by Clint Eastwood, *The Hurt Locker* by the aforementioned Bigalow or *Argo* by Ben Affleck, which was criticized for its portrayal of the Iranian angry mob as a zombie invasion against the heroic and virtuous employees of the U.S. embassy). Marouf continues by explaining that these types of visual representations are important in their ideological consequences, especially for their take on American exceptionalism.[49] He cites Raka Shome which warns about the potential of the "signifier of U.S. exceptionalism" to be used as a tool for the creation of realities in which the unknown of foreign lands is dichotomized with the "openness of the United States and the American vision of equality and human rights."[50] Some more proof if it was needed that movies and popular culture are an important source for analysis. There is, however, no question about the responsibility of the movie makers for their production and its potential polysemous content. Freedom of expression is the baseline for any artistic production and, as mentioned above, it will never be argued that the movie makers cited, whether it is for military or superhero movies, have a specific political agenda.

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[46] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 15.
[47] Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory,* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[48] Hasian Jr Marouf A."Military Orientalism at the Cineplex: A Postcolonial Reading of Zero Dark Thirty", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol. 31 No. 5 (2014): 465.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Raka Shome, "Mapping the limits of multiculturalism in the context of globalization," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 153.

How then was 9/11 portrayed in movies? Reza Aslan describes how for both the audiences and the media (whether it was on the radio, in the newspapers or on television), the attacks of 9/11 looked "like a movie". According to Aslan, this is simply a consequence of "cinematic vision", which is the "tendency for eyewitnesses of a disaster to distance themselves from the horror of reality by viewing events as though through the lens of a camera"[51] but, this general impression that it was "like a movie" derived from the nature of the attacks: the "hijacked airplanes", "crumbling skyscrapers", the "crush of people on the ground suddenly shrouded by a cloud of ash and rumble". It all looked like it could have been written for a Hollywood disaster movie. But this very visual aspect of 9/11 also explains why the response also had a fairly theatrical feel: "The machine gun-toting cops guarding the streets. The mawkish displays of patriotism. The glamorizing of torture (itself a product of the movies, where torture is always used to extract just the right kind of information at just the right time)."[52] Aslan argues furthermore that these portrayals in popular culture helped more than anything else in constructing a digestible enough Manichean story where you were either a "hero or villain", "good or evil", "with us" or "against us".[53]

These very "theatrical" images would not have had the same impact without the evolutions of visual technologies. The importance of visual representation has been greatly enhanced by the increasing use of special effects or Computer-Generated Images (CGI). As Scott Bukatman acknowledges, "special effect emphasize real time, shared space, perceptual activity, kinesthetic sensation, haptic engagement, and an emphatic sense of wonder."[54] This allows for the creation of what Bukatman calls an "aesthetic of astonishment", which permits to break through a normative space/time continuum and to exceed the limitations of the human body.[55] To use the example of *The Avengers* movie, there were more than an astounding 2200 special effects created with the help of 14 different companies, which included "the entire NY cityscape, the Helicarrier, and even the Iron Man and the Hulk."[56] Interestingly, the company Industrial Light & Magic, created by George Lucas (director of the original *Star Wars* trilogy), responsible for impressive achievements in the technologies of visual representation and for participating in the production of more than 300 films over the course of its existence, has been

[51] Reza Aslan, "Foreword", in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the War on Terror*, ed. Froula, Randell and Birkenstein (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010): xii.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th century*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 115-116.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 223-224.

acquired by The Walt Disney Company in 2012.[57] The latter has been, for the last few years, doing remakes of the original Disney movies (such as *The Jungle Book* or, this year, *The Lion King*, both directed by Jon Favreau who is also very involved in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as we will see in the second chapter) displaying an amazing talent for recreating the characters of our childhoods with stunning visuals. Lori Ann Crowe very pragmatically analyzes this development in which:

> *action in film is now not just "made alive", but we are made to feel as though we are living in it. That is, while the films themselves are more fantastical, the huge leaps that have been made in CG techniques in the last few years allow us to maintain a kinetic connection with our characters and environment. There is both a visual intensity and an experiential, visceral, and kinesthetic sensation achieved through camera work, editing, sound, and special effects that allows us to feel as though a part of the action. So, while visual effects create freedom from the constraints historically of attempts at reality-based filmmaking, they allow the fantastical to feel more visceral than ever before; we are increasingly surrounded by enhanced visual mediums that allows and encourages us to experience the inconceivable and for it to be believable.*[58]

We already saw that it was easy to see a correlation between the "Spectacle" and blockbusters: it is probably even easier to make a connection between the "Spectacle" and special effects which are, by definition, destined to create wonder. The world of today is filled with images and representations and the black mirror's medium is its apotheosis. By combining sight and hearing through the technological advancements that provide the audiences with beautiful imagery and state of the art sound quality, by editing movies so that the viewers will get hooked from beginning to end thanks to the genius of story tellers, movie makers create for their viewers a wonderful world which, allows to escape reality for a little while. Harvey R. Greenberg beautifully said that "when reality - or what passes for it - becomes too much to bear, the siren song of cinema is likely to prove irresistible."

On that note, the next section will draft the theoretical approach for this research.

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[57] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 223-224.
[58] Ibid.

3. Construction of identities

The approach retained for this thesis is constructivism. The latter does not stop at (usual) materialist definitions of international relations and focuses more on the importance of ideas in shaping the identities and interests of the actors as well as their actions. There is however still the acknowledgement of the "existence of a reality (structure) in which humans exist" even though this structure is "mutually constituted by actors (agents) in collective processes.[59] A key author of the constructivist approach is Alexander Wendt, especially with his notion (from the article of the same name) that "anarchy is what states make of it"[60] which underlines the importance of understanding the construction of an actor's identity to analyze its actions, behaviors and discourses: ideas prevail and material factors come after because the meaning of material structures is, in the end, dependent on the ideas that shape the meaning.[61] Realism and liberalism usually analyze structures as being completely independent from the perception of actors, while constructivism "asserts that structures exist insofar agents attach particular meanings to them. These particular meanings derive from the ideas held by actors."[62] These ideas, in turn, modulate the identities and interests of actors whose identities are already shaped by previous experiences and ideas which can change or evolve by encountering other actors.[63] Nina Tannenwald dedicated several of her works to understanding the role of ideas; she explains that it is because constructivism focuses on the constitutive effect that ideas can have that you can interpret the identities and interests being analyzed. Furthermore, ideas help to understand how actors self-identify as an independent entity as well as a social object. Understanding and analyzing these perceptions is key to also comprehend actor's interests.[64] Tannenwald argues, moreover, that "causal analysis and constitutive analysis are equally valid explanatory strategies or the role of ideas."[65]

Therefore, in the case of this research, the first target will be analyzing how the super hero genre and pop culture (this was exposed in the first section of this chapter) in general

[59] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 41-42.
[60] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it," Cambridge: *International organization* Vol. 46, n. 2 (1992).
[61] Ibid, 394-395.
[62] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 41-42.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Nina Tannenwald, "Ideas and explanation: advancing the theoretical agenda," Cambridge: *Journal of cold war studies* Vol. 7, no. 2 (2005): 19.
[65] Nina Tannenwald and William C. Wohlforth, "Introduction: The role of ideas and the end of the cold war," Cambridge: *Journal of cold war studies* Vol. 7, n. 2 (2007): 9.

works as a medium through which ideas are diffused and can shape the actors' identities. This was notably shown in the book *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies* edited by Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton which notably includes authors such as Duncombe and Bleiker (2015), Weldes and Rowley (2015) and Dodds (2015). On the relation between politics, international relations and popular culture, Martin (2006), Neumann and Nexon (2006), Davies and Philpott (2013), Wang (2013), Saunders (2014) and Grayson (2015) made significant contributions while Kukkonen (2010) and Miettinen (2011) (they are both from the same university), by focusing on fables and super heroes, provided great research to understand the place of superheroes in pop culture. The thesis, however, focuses on movies and the visual aspect of this medium is therefore crucial to understand how it might affect the audiences and construct their identities. Guy Debord, with his *The Society of the Spectacle* written in 1967, provided a great analysis of modern times in terms of representations and authors such as Agamben (2000) as well as Furman and Musgrave (2017) brilliantly followed in his footsteps with their contributions. On the economic aspect of movies (and, in this case, Hollywood in particular), Jenkins (2001) and Hozic (2001) also provided good insights while Bukatman (2003) and Dittmer (2011) were key in understanding the influence of special effects and CGI on audiences. A special mention has to be made of Lori Ann Crowe which, through her PhD dissertation *Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes*, proved vital in understanding how popular culture and visual representation cannot be dissociated from superheroes. Furthermore, her thesis provides a great analysis between Hollywood superheroes and militarism, security, genre and technology and it is highly encouraged to read her dissertation.

It is therefore quite clear that agents are as important as structures in constructivism, and the theory even goes further by suggesting that they are mutually constitutive, meaning that they cannot be separated in their analysis. It does not mean that structures have to be seen as redundant, but rather that "identities, interests, and their interaction processes create structures which affect the behavior of actors."[66] This, in turn, is necessary to understand how the U.S. came to create its "exceptionalist" identity, how the latter created specific structures and finally how it shapes its decisions and behaviors in international politics and relations. In the end, like the ouroboros biting its own tail, these interactions on an international scale (and between states in particular) are key drivers to build the identities and interests of the agents

[66] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 42.

creating these structures.[67] Authors such as Gutfeld (2002), Patman (2006) and especially Pease (2009) allowed to understand how American exceptionalism was built, from Tocqueville to the *Manifest Destiny*, from the Monroe Doctrine to the War on Terror. *The New American Exceptionalism* by Pease is very often quoted as a reference to understanding how the concept came to build behaviors and actions on an international scale, and Segal's (2000) work on American Utopia further allowed to comprehend how the identity and interests of Americans were built. However, the key moment for American Exceptionalism in the last few decades was without a doubt 9/11. This traumatic event shaped the policies of all the presidencies that followed and in particular Bush's administration. This is shown particularly well in Patman (2006), Karabel (2011) and Spanos (2013) who give a very clear overview of how 9/11 further exacerbated this belief in American exceptionalism and the actions they enabled, which still shapes international politics today. The consequences of this reborn identities and beliefs reshaped the interests of the U.S. on a global scale, based on security (and especially insecurity). These new-found interests had direct consequences in international law, which is the focus of this thesis. The interaction between American exceptionalism and international law is particularly made obvious in Michael Ignatieff's *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (2005) which includes valuable contributions from Koh (2005) and Moravvcsik (2005) and the book as a whole is suggested as a baseline for understanding that interaction. O'Connell (2003) and Bradford and Posner (2011) further studied this interaction and while O'Connell focuses on the use of self-defense as an excuse to sometimes intervene unlawfully, Bradford and Posner actually defend that every nation behaves in an exceptional way in some way or the other. While Bradford and Posner's work provide valuable insights and research on the history of exceptionalism, their view that American exceptionalism is just one type of exceptionalism among many is not shared in this thesis, as it is also not shared by all the authors cited above.

Another element that is key in constructivism is the belief that identities are multiple. The authors Ronald Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein identified two types of identities. The first type stems from the domestic environment of actors. The second one is built according and being influenced by an external social structure in which actors interact.[68] These identities were defined by Alexander Wendt as corporate (the first type) and social (the

[67] Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 148.
[68] Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, "Norms, identity and culture in national security" in *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics,* ed. Katzenstein, *(*New York: Columbia University Press, 1996): 59.

second type): these identities interconnect to build the actor's interest.[69] Wendt defines the corporate identity as "the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute actor individuality."[70] For an organization (most of the time, a state), this identity will usually be presented on an international scale through its government.[71] The social identities indicate "sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object." These social identities are, first of all, multiple and allow the actors to situate themselves in comparison and in relation to the others which means, in other terms, that these identities form the role of these actors.[72] These types of identities apply very well to superheroes: their corporate identity is designed by their own experiences, their own history and by their specific qualities that make them who they are. Their social identities, however, depends on what is expected from them and how it gives them a purpose, a role, a responsibility. Superheroes' corporate identity constructs them as individuals while their status of superhero characterizes them as social objects when in relation to other individuals. This corporate identity has been analyzed by DiPaolo (2011), Costello and Worcester (2013) and especially Coogan (2006) which, through his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* made a remarkable analysis of the history of the genre. As for American exceptionalism, 9/11 allowed for superheroes to catch a second breath and to reshape their identity in light of the insecurity that the U.S. was facing. McLaughlin (2005), Costello (2009), Hassler-Forest (2011), Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester (2013), Hagley and Harrison (2014) and Moulton (2017) analyzed this renewed portrayal of superheroes after 9/11 and showed that these dark times in American history called for "real heroes" to face these new threats, often simply described as "others". As Nick Fury famously said in the movie *The Avengers*: "The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could."[73] There is a lot that is expected from these "remarkable" people, and because of that these people's social identity is imbedded with a sense of responsibility. The question of morality therefore arises: to what extent are they responsible and, mostly, of how much liberty should they dispose to be able to perform in their role? This

[69] Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 233.
[70] Alexander Wendt, "Collective identity formation and the international state," Washington, D.C**:** *American political science review* Vol. 88, no. 2 (1994): 385.
[71] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 42-43.
[72] Alexander Wendt, "Collective identity formation and the international state," Washington, D.C**:** *American political science review* Vol. 88, no. 2 (1994): 385.
[73] Joss Whedon, *The Avengers,* Marvel, 25 April 2012.

is where the relation between superheroes, law and justice is being questioned. This topic has been addressed notably by Pearson and Uricchio (1991), Reynolds (1992), Ndalianis (2009) and Miettinen (2011). The author Jason Bainbridge deserves, however, a special mention since his articles *The Call to Justice: Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State during Wartime* (2015) and *Beyond the Law: What is so "Super" About Superheroes and Supervillains?* (2017) provided great documentation about the relation between superheroes and law.

Having understood how ideas are relevant and how they shape identities, constructivism also allows to explain how these identities define the actions that will ensue. Ramón Pacheco Pardo argues that these actions and the identities that justify them:

> *can be placed along a continuum. At the higher end we find identities requiring some type of behavior and precluding other actions from being taken. At the lower end of the continuum identities have little impact on the actions of an actor but may be used to justify certain policies. In the middle of the continuum we encounter identities that make certain behavior more likely. Accordingly, a state's corporate identity and perception of another state may make certain policies inevitable or more likely if the identity and perception are towards the higher end of the continuum.*[74]

But to analyze how ideas influence an agent's identity would not be complete without understanding whose ideas matter. Therefore, through the constructivist approach, the behavior as well as the actions of the U.S. in terms of exceptionalism will not only focus on the behavior and actions of the government but also on the discourses of the heads of government (in particular George Bush).

Conclusion

This first chapter aimed at understanding the general context that breeds superheroes. It did so firstly by focusing on popular culture as a whole and how it relates to international relations. This was necessary because pop culture is rarely what is thought of when it comes to understanding the complexities of world politics. What is argued here is therefore that pop

[74] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 43.

culture reflects political events and that, because of its immense popularity, it has to be seen as a relevant source of studies. This does not mean, however, that pop culture provides more information than academic sources, far from it, but rather that pop culture's influence on its audience should be seen as a given. Furthermore, this research focuses specifically on movies, and we argue that visual representation through pop culture provides a medium that is a lot more user-friendly in terms of complexity and accessibility. How many people knew the actual intricacies of the crisis of 2008 before the movie *The Big Short*? How many people will understand the implications of Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the Trump's 2017 campaign through the Netflix documentary *The Great Hack*? And how many people actually knew who Dick Chenney was before the movie *Vice*? It would be impossible to quantify these assumptions, but we would argue that these key political events are now comprehended a lot more through these movies and documentaries.

The second objective of this chapter was to draft the academic framework of this research. This was achieved through the constructivist theoretical approach which underlined the importance of the construction of identities and the centrality of agents. The theory is essential in understanding how the U.S. identity was built as exceptional, thus shaping superheroes' own identities in that particular context.

Now that the cards have been laid on the table, the next chapter will delve into the meat of this research: superheroes and American exceptionalism.

Chapter II - Superheroes and American Exceptionalism

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the main themes addressed in this thesis: super heroes, American exceptionalism and their relationship with Justice and Law.

To better understand the general appeal for *ubermensch*, the first part of this chapter will therefore put the emphasis on super heroes, first drafting a brief history of superheroes and their representations over time in popular culture, how they reflect the *air du temps*, going from the ancient Greeks (and Homer in particular through his portrayal of the Greek man) to the Cold War and what their core characteristics are. Following that brief overview, the next section will have a particular interest in the post 9/11 presence of these *ubermensch*. 9/11 was a particularly traumatic event for the American psyche and had huge repercussions, whether it was in politics or in culture. The objective of that second section will therefore be to analyze that representation of super heroes after 9/11 compared to the "real heroes" and how the super hero genre witnessed a revival, as it often did after meaningful political events. The particular relationship with law and justice that superheroes have will then be analyzed, and particularly how that relation can be a challenge to the State's sovereignty in Carl Schmitt's "state of exception".

The second part of this chapter will focus on American exceptionalism, by first addressing the general history of the concept, going from Alexis de Tocqueville to the United States promoting itself as a global leader after WWII. In the following section, mirroring the super hero part, the target will be to analyze American exceptionalism after 9/11 and how it witnessed a revival especially through Bush's administration with the unlawful invasion of Iraq and the global War on Terror. Finally, the complicated relation between American exceptionalism and international law will be analyzed and, more specifically, how the Manichean rhetoric used by the Bush administration created a confusion between Justice and Law, shaping the cinematic production that followed.

1. Superheroes

Before getting to the core of the subject, it is important to define what the super hero genre is. James Mulder gives a rather crude one that states that it is a genre:

> *that remains, despite decades of critical study, indicatively oriented toward the anxieties and self-images of white male artists, characters, and fans. If, as is widely agreed, the superhero is a cipher in which the fan is meant to locate her own image, then the burden borne by the superhero is precisely the burden of ideology.*[75]

Overall, the concept of *ubermensch* has fascinated both authors and public for thousands of years, dating back to Homer and the concept of the archaic Greek epic hero, which was linked to the desire of protection for the communities through superhuman entities with the ability to provide protection[76]. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were already songs about exceeding men's limitations. The metaphysical power of the Homerian hero has shaped the European culture and later the North American one, and is still an ever-present part of our collective unconscious. For Hannah Arendt, everyone could have found a use in the Homerian hero: he was the reference to measure our own greatness, whether it was through Ajax's strength, Hector's noble tenderness or Ulysses' cunning.[77] However, there is an important distinction with nowadays' heroes. What we loved about these Greek heroes was that none of them were perfect (and neither were their gods): the time for the monotheistic and impenetrable God had not yet arrived, with its deeply entrenched Manicheanism (the question of Manicheanism in the Marvel Cinematic Universe will be addressed at the end of this chapter). The idea of embodying justice into men was already something that could appeal more to the public instead of an impersonal law which could (and can still) be considered as ethereal and abstract, through for instance the Greek blindfolded figure of Justice.[78]

Going from the ancients to the moderns, a more recent account of the *ubermensch* can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's overman (or superman, which actually inspired the creation of the comic book of the same name). In the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the

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[75] James Mulder, "Believe It or Not, This is Power: Embodied Crisis and the Superhero on Film", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50 (2017): 1048.
[76] Julio López Saco, "The Configuration of the Archaic Greek Epic Hero through Homer and Hesiod", *El Futuro del Pasado,* 9 (2018): 159.
[77] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: Second Edition*, (University of Chicago Press, 2019), 195.
[78] Jason Bainbridge, "The Call to Justice: Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State during Wartime", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 28 (2015): 745.

aforementioned declares: "I teach you the Superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass man?"[79] In the wake of *les Lumières* and individualism as a new religion, Nietzsche now teaches how to surpass man to become a superman, how to become *ubermensch*. God is dead and men have to become the new gods in a nihilistic world that does not care about them.[80] The philosopher argues that these superior men have skills and abilities that go beyond the common capabilities of people. They include strength, talent and, an important notion in Nietzsche's work, the concept of "will to power". The latter is the most important in Nietzsche's mind, for it allows the bestowed individuals to control and dominate the available resources.[81]

However, the first mentions of superheroes as such can be attributable to the "dime novels" and "penny dreadfuls" of the nineteenth century[82]. These super heroic figures were defined by Chris Gavaler as "a reflection of English Nineteenth-century colonialism"[83], a dark past that according to the author still haunts the super hero genre. Albert Memmi argued, furthermore, that this production portrayed the colonized as an alter ego of the colonizer.[84] The first ever superhero was Spring-Heel'd Jack (See Annex 1), which was considered to be the first to match the core characteristics of what the superhero was supposed to be.[85] It is interesting to see that this character was born during the British Empire's expansion and practically disappeared during the transition to a settler's nation. However, that brief history of the British superhero found a proliferous recipient in the United States of America and its ambitions that could only be defined as imperial, through (between the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century) its last battle against native tribes and its taking ownership of Guam, the Philippines and Puerto Rico.[86]

It is therefore in the beginning of the 20th century in the United States and especially between the two World Wars that the super hero genre began to have a special place in culture (the best example is probably Captain America punching Hitler on the cover of the first Captain America Comics on the 1st of March 1941 - see Annex 2), through "the advent of cheap

[79] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ainsi Parlait Zarathustra*, (Éditions Gallimard, 1947): 18.
[80] Jason Bainbridge, "Beyond the Law: What is so "Super" About Superheroes and Supervillains?", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30 (2017): 370-371.
[81] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The will to power*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and Walter Kaufman (Vintage, 1968).
[82] Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester, "The Politics of the Superhero", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2013): 87-88.
[83] Chris Gavaler, "The Imperial Superhero", *PS: Political Science and Politics* 47, no. 1 (2014): 108-109.
[84] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, (Beacon, 1957).
[85] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, (Monkey Brain Books, 2006).
[86] Chris Gavaler, "The Imperial Superhero", *PS: Political Science and Politics* 47, no. 1 (2014): 108-109.

printing, mass literacy and leisure time"[87]. We can trace back its origins to 1938 with the appearance of Superman in Action Comics, whose commercial success led to the creation of many more super heroes. This is what is known as the "Golden Age" of superheroes, which resulted in a great proliferation of superheroes as well as enormous comics sales. Furthermore, it represented a way to defuse the tension linked with the horrors of war through humor and even, sometimes, revisionism.[88] However, superheroes were then indissociably associated with wartime (which lead to an important literature focusing on the militarism of superheroes, which will however not be the focus of this thesis) and during the rest of World War II comic book covers became mediums to advertise war bonds which showed that superheroes were progressively and increasingly part of the propaganda machine which showed that they were "becoming broadly reflective of the shifts in culture and obfuscating their quite active role in this cultural change."[89] Nevertheless, the end of World War II called for a return to "normality": superheroes had proven themselves to be actors of change in the climate of the war and not only mythical heroic archetypes, while after the war they actually became considered "abnormal" and "deviant" in the eyes of society, going from needed in the time of war to rejected when they were not needed anymore.[90]

However, a new and never seen before type of war was set to see the sun: The Cold War. The latter was the perfect source for a renewed inspiration and, from that point on, superheroes were indissociably associated with politics, whether it was to endorse candidates, to argue about the Vietnam war or even to give their opinion about gay marriage.[91] Furthermore, they have also been a general reflection of the public's opinion by "being pro-war during wartime and pacifistic during peacetime almost as often as they have served as the voice of the minority opinion, crying for peace during wartime and advocating going to war when the public is reluctant to do so."[92] Marc DiPaolo differentiates three types of narratives when it comes to superheroes with a political agenda: establishment, in which the superhero fights to preserve the social status quo acting as homeland security against foreign invasion of any form; anti-establishment as the opposite to the previous one, where the evil government /

[87] Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester, "The Politics of the Superhero", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2013): 85.
[88] Jason Bainbridge, "The Call to Justice: Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State during Wartime", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 28 (2015): 745
[89] Ibid, 755.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester, "The Politics of the Superhero", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2013): 85.
[92] Marc Dipaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, (McFarland, 2011): 11-12.

corporation is the supervillain and finally colonial, with as objective a "civilizing mission" in a foreign land before a third power gets his hands on that untouched and uncivilized country.[93]

Having briefly summed up the main historical turning points of superheroes, defining the concept is still no easy task; it is a complex and widely used concept that needs a precise definition, which can be found in Peter Coogan and will be the one retained for this thesis:

> *Su•per•he•ro (soo'per hîr'o) n., pl. - roes. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. – superheroic, adj. Also super hero, super-hero.*[94]

Stan Lee, one of the main lead creators of Marvel, himself defined superheroes as beings that can "just do things a little better". What it means is that super heroes must have powers that ordinary people would not have, otherwise even a police officer could be considered a superhero. The powers that we attribute to super humans are often associated with the myth of Hercules and his twelve labors, while the costume is often linked to Robin Hood and his fight for the weak. Furthermore, one of the main characteristics is a dual-identity (Superman/Clark Kent, Batman/Bruce Wayne, Spider Man/Peter Parker) and can be traced back to characters such as the Scarlet Pimpernel (1903) and, maybe more obvious, Zorro (1919).[95]

The next section will focus on the depiction of super heroes after the event that shaped the American foreign policy for the years to come and still today: 9/11.

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[93] Marc Dipaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, (McFarland, 2011): 11-12.
[94] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, (Monkey Brain Books, 2006).
[95] Jason Bainbridge, "Beyond the Law: What is so "Super" About Superheroes and Supervillains?", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30 (2017): 370-371.

1.1 Superheroes after 9/11

It is after the events of the 11 September 2011 that superheroes got a true second breath. The critic Frank Rich said, concerning Spider-Man 2, in the article "Spidey Crushes 'Fahrenheit' in 2004" released in the New York Times in July 2004, that

> *Unlike the sunnier first Spider-Man, which was released two summers ago, but conceived before the terrorist attacks, the new one carries the shadow of 9/11. As the story shifts from Queens into Manhattan, the city becomes a much more vivid presence. The director, Sam Raimi, dotes on both the old (the Empire State Building in silvery mode) and the new (the Hayden Planetarium), on both the dreamily nostalgic (a fairy-book Broadway theater seemingly resurrected from an Edwardian past) and the neighborhood of our freshest wound (the canyons of lower Manhattan). The movie is suffused with a nocturnal glow of melancholy that casts its comic-book action in an unexpected poignant light.*

John Costello observes that the superhero genre was always quick to adapt to the national and global events, in particular political and social tensions[96]; Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison describe this resurrection (especially in film) as "a direct response to the feelings of helplessness and terror that Americans experienced in the days and years following the attacks. This renewed interest is also a revealing look at the psyche of a nation as it struggled with war, retribution, and its own constitutional and democratic imperatives."[97] It was always during periods of ideological conflicts between the United States and their political enemies that the biggest reshaping of superheroes happened, and it was only logical to ask the same question after 9/11 and the War on Terror that followed, especially because superheroes had now become overly important and represented in popular culture.[98]

Jon Favreau (director of *Iron Man (2008)* and *Iron Man 2 (2010)* as well as producer of the *Avengers* series), in an interview for the website *Superhero Hype* in 2008, argued that the American public had a need for an escape which could be perfectly imbedded in Manichean

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[96] Matthew Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America,* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009).
[97] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 120.
[98] Dan Hassler-Forest, "From Flying Man to Falling Man. 9/11 Discourse in Superman Returns and Batman Begins" in *Portraying 9/11: Essays on Representations in Comics, Literature, Film and Theatre*, ed. Bragard, Dony, & Rosenberg, (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011): 136.

linear types of stories, where the good guys and the bad guys could easily be identified. Even if he pointed out that this specific kind of story telling could be seen as both simple and provocative, it still allowed the public to find in these particular figures a way of externalizing their own feelings in that specific state of affairs. Furthermore, these movies addressed the questions of the war on terror more openly, whether it is through the figure of the joker as the super terrorist / super villain in the *Dark Knight (2008)* by Christopher Nolan or even in his own *Iron Man* that starts off with events happening in Afghanistan.

The first reactions of superheroes to the events, however, were not on the big screen but on the pages of comic books. DC Comics and Marvel both published special editions linked to 9/11 which featured policemen and firemen working side to side with superheroes to clear the rubbles, help the wounded and take them to hospitals. In the *Captain America* Vol.4 No.1 comic (see Annex - 4), for instance, *Captain America* declares: "We've got to be stronger than we've ever been—as a people. As a nation. We have to be America. Or they've won. We're going to make it through this—we, the people. United by a power that no enemy of freedom could begin to understand. We share—we are—the American Dream."[99] This mixture of real events and fiction was seen as questionable by many readers, even though this feeling was then mitigated when they realized that these special editions were meant to profit the victims and their families through sales.[100] Marc DiPaolo explains that:

> *Some of the most emotionally charged moments from the collections of portraits and short stories included art that proclaimed the police and firemen who raced into the falling towers the real heroes, and suggested that the campy and fictional "superheroes" of both the Marvel and DC universes could never live up to the example of such heroism*.[101]

The TV show *The Boys,* released in 2019 by Amazon Prime, even made a sarcastic reference to these "true heroes" when, after intervening during a military intervention, the superhero called "Homelander" (the name itself is ironic) tells the soldiers on their mission: "Howdy boys! Oh, sorry... sorry sorry. How are you guys doing? Good? Why don't you, uhm, go have a smoke or something. Ok? I got this. Oh! And... you guys... you are the real heroes."[102]

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[99] John Ney Rieber (w), John Cassaday (p), "Captain America Vol.4 No.1", *Marvel Comics* (June 2002).
[100] Marc Dipaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film*, (McFarland, 2011): 20-21.
[101] Ibid.
[102] *The Boys,* "You Found Me", directed by Eric Kripke. *Amazon Prime,* 26 Jul. 2019.

Jeffery Moulton remarks, furthermore, that “real life heroes were plentiful in the post 9/11 world, but superheroes were even more so. The ten years following the attacks witnessed one of the biggest explosions of superhero-themed movies, comics, TV shows, and more”.[103] A lot of Marvel superheroes in particular were based in New York and not fictional cities (for instance Gotham City) and so were the World Trade Center Towers: it was therefore probably necessary for them to interact with the events and, as Matthew Pustz puts it, "characters like Superman, Spider-Man, and the Hulk became lenses through which their creators attempted to define the sense of loss but also unity that accompanied the national trauma."[104]

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is in fact a very good example through which we can see this change in mentality and this depiction of the War on Terror in movies. If we analyze the series of movies from the first phase, for instance, there are some patterns that can only be associated with what Obama's administration called "Overseas Contingency Operation". First of all, the so-called Avengers Initiative is a state-based expansion of power which has for purpose to find Infinity Stones (which are hard not to associate with weapons of mass destruction and to the invasion of Iraq).[105] Secondly, the counter-terrorism special law enforcement agency called SHIELD in the Marvel Universe used to stand for "Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage and Law-Enforcement Division". After the first instalments of the MCU, it was then changed to "Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division". What is interesting here is the use of the term "Homeland"; the latter was used by the Bush administration when they founded in 2002 the "United States Department of Homeland Security" whose creation served as a reaction to the events of 9/11 through prerogatives such as anti-terrorism, immigration control or public security. Thirdly, the figure of the supervillain Loki (probably more obvious is Thanos, plotting the destruction of half the universe from a remote and unknown destination lost somewhere in the universe, who came however in later instalments) who, again, is a perfect depiction of a super terrorist and hard not to associate with Osama Bin Laden.[106] Finally (and probably more obviously), the last movie of the first phase of the MCU, the *Avengers*, ends with a battle between superheroes and aliens whose objective is to destroy a tower (the Stark tower), using an exact replica of the actual events maybe being the best way to deal with the events and, in

[103] Jeffery Moulton, *The Superhero Response: How 9/11Changed Our Superheroes and Why It Matters, (*N.p.: Jeffery Moulton, 2017).
[104] Matthew Pustz, *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*, (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012): 224.
[105] Jason Bainbridge, "The Call to Justice: Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State during Wartime", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 28 (2015): 745
[106] Ibid.

this case, to rewrite history. Joseph Darowski argues that 9/11 saw a reinvention of the alien invasion genre which is "primarily concerned with the fear of an ill-defined other that is conspiring against the USA, and a paranoia that his other is being assisted by co-conspirators within American itself."[107]

Overall, when analyzing the different patterns that emerged after 9/11 in superhero production, it is clear that these events gave a second breath to superhero production. This also allowed for another type of questioning, which was their particular relation to law and justice.

1.2 Superheroes and Justice

The notion of justice is intrinsically linked with superheroes. Jason Bainbridge calls the particular form of justice that superheroes use *substantive justice*. He defines it as:

> *a pragmatic view of justice being the ''correct'' or ''fair'' result, predicated on the notion that something is ''just'' when individuals get what is due to them. It is a morally relativistic position in that while justice is capable of different meanings depending on where it is found—it is produced more by its relationship with law than its social or cultural context.*[108]

It is overall a detachment from procedural justice, a way to distribute justice through a certain idea of greater social good instead of the usual positivist due process. Superheroes are therefore more attached to the idea of protecting the community rather than individuals' rights (in this case, the villains' rights).[109] On a more moralistic and symbolistic point of view, superheroes can express some ideas and concepts that other genres do not have the capacity to do: power, for instance. Through the latter, they can impose their own perception of justice on others and they can use that power with no consequences nor danger for themselves while dealing with any unlawful issues in ways that the authorities could only dream of.[110] The concept of morality is imbedded and even necessary to the superhero genre, raising questions

[107] Dyfrig Jones, "Islamic Invaders: Secret Invasion and the post-9/11 World of Marvel" in *The Ages of the Avengers: Essays on the Earth's Mightiest Heroes in Changing Times,* ed. Darowski (McFarland, 2014).
[108] Jason Bainbridge, "Beyond the Law: What is so "Super" About Superheroes and Supervillains?", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30 (2017): 370-371.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, (Monkey Brain Books, 2006): 231.

about loyalty, responsibility, patriotism or in general more universal topics and in the struggles of superheroes we can see our own.[111]

Richard Reynolds also gave a definition of the main characteristics of super heroes in that super heroes have a certain devotion to justice, which can sometimes override the devotion to law[112]. As a consequence, a different use of these laws could be what is associated with supervillains. This link with justice is deeply entrenched in the genre. Superheroes usually fight crime, which is the perfect metaphor for the boundary between law and lawlessness. However, superheroes often intervene in what is the legitimate authority of the State when it comes to the distribution of justice, which can be interpreted as a critic against the State not having the necessary means to make sure that justice is served or a superior moral judgement that the State simply cannot provide.[113]

Carl Schmitt defines the sovereign as the entity that defines the exception, "it is the essence of sovereignty both to decide the exception and to make the decisions appropriate to that exception"[114]. According to Schmitt's view, superheroes could be portrayed as sovereign through their legitimate role as protectors of the communities, helped by the capabilities that differentiate them from the "common people". At this point, superheroes intervene when the State cannot, which leads to a certain form of state of exception and they therefore inherit the sovereign power of the state, the legitimacy to distribute justice.[115] The concept of state of exception was coined by Schmitt in the early 20th century and describes a suspension of civil/executive/legal rights which transforms into a dominant paradigm when prolonged. However, it is in the continuity of this state of emergency (this continuity also characterizes superheroes comics as well as movies, with stories destined to never completely end: in the San Diego 2019 Comic-Con International, the Marvel panel announced its next projects and movies for the fourth phase, which will last for at least 3 years until the fifth phase is announced, with endless future possibilities) that it becomes a state of exception, and the problem lies in a prolonged stay in that state, because it is when the superhero actually becomes a challenge to the state.[116] For Mervi Mittenien, it implies that:

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[111] Robin S. Rosenberg, *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*, (Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc, 2008): 2.
[112] Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A modern mythology*, (University of Mississippi Press, 1992).
[113] Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester, "The Politics of the Superhero", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2013): 86.
[114] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[115] Jason Bainbridge, "Beyond the Law: What is so "Super" About Superheroes and Supervillains?", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30 (2017): 373-374.
[116] Giorgio Agamben, *The state of emergency*, (Generation Online, 2003).

> *the superhero, by his [or her] nature, exists in the terrain between law and politics, in a state of emergency, breaking the law in order to uphold it. The superhero executes acts of power, but at the same time, has no legislative power... has no legal position as an agent of the law, yet acts like one.*[117]

In doing so, the superhero acts above the law and, by definition, above the state, making him even superior to the state.[118] Tony Spanakos recognizes that fact by saying that the superhero genre "taught us to believe our liberty is more likely to be protected by heroes, who are above and beyond the state, than by the bureaucrats who comprise it."[119] Jason Dittmer further acknowledges this argument by saying that "avoiding the shackles of governmental authority is a longstanding theme of super-heroism"[120] and it has to be said that the public actually has empathy for this superhero struggling to find right and wrong on his moral compass which, as Lori Ann Crowe observes, enables a catharsis[121]: "there is a sort of comfort of sorts to be found in the belief that someone out there has both the power and the ethical certainty to judge and to punish with transcendental impartiality."[122]

A famous quote from Robert Cover states: "Legal interpretation take place in a field of pain and death. [...] Neither legal interpretation nor the violence it occasions may be properly understood apart from one another."[123] A perfect instance in which this takes place is during war, where the law of armed-conflict comes into action creating a completely new empire of laws. Analyzed in the opposite way, we could argue that law legitimizes war (indirectly) by defining what can and what cannot be done during its duration.[124] It is however in these particular times that we see superheroes emerge, in what Robert Cover calls a *nomos*, a universe of law in which we "constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and

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[117] Mervi Miettinen, "Representing the state of exception: Power, utopia, visuality and narrative in superhero comics" in *Images in Use: Towards the critical analysis of visual communication*, ed. Stocchetti & Kukkonen (Discourses Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture, 2011): 280.
[118] Jason Bainbridge, "Beyond the Law: What is so "Super" About Superheroes and Supervillains?", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30 (2017): 374-375.
[119] Tony Spanakos, "Governing Gotham." in *Batman and Philosophy: The Dark Knight of the Soul,* ed. Mark D. White and Robert Arp. (John Wiley & Sons, 2008): 56.
[120] Jason Dittmer, "American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom", *Environment and Planning-Part D* 29 (2011): 114.
[121] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 82.
[122] Jason Dittmer, "American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom", *Environment and Planning-Part D* 29 (2011): 55.
[123] Robert Cover, "Violence and the word". *Yale Law Journal* 95 (1986): 1601.
[124] Mark Osiel, *The end of reciprocity: Terror, torture, and the law of war*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

unlawful, of valid and void."[125] Some of the most obvious instances are the transition between the Great Depression and the second World War (in which we saw emerge first *Superman* and then *Captain America*) and the Cold War and its intricacies, that led to the most prolific period for Marvel superheroes.[126] In the end, super heroes then become stuck between on one hand being the promoters of democratic equality by projecting their superpowers onto regular citizens but, on the other hand, the core fact that they are transformed into super heroes make them unfit for "democratic citizenship".[127] It has to be mentioned that, historically, these *ubermensch* were not always good, honorable men but rather mercenaries, rebels, warriors who "by tight of their objectification and worship transcend moral judgement"[128] and as Aristotle wrote a long time ago, "There is no law which embraces men of that caliber: they are themselves the law."

These men, however, have counterparts that are often equally powerful (if not more) and ever present in the genre: supervillains. The latter are often easily identifiable through their particular costumes (Loki, mentioned above, is no different with his devilish horned helmet and the dark green color of his costume) and unattractive aspect (whether it is a pale figure, ugly wounds or dark features such as *Maleficent*'s[129]), for their evil plans to destroy humanity as we know it, requiring someone able to administer them a righteous justice (if not violence). Lori Ann Crowe describes five typical traits of the super villains; "1) evil from birth, or inherently immoral, with an overt disregard for the lives of others, 2) dangerous and unpredictable, 3) power hungry and vain, 4) a representation of our darkest instincts, flaws, and fears and, most importantly, 5) essentially different from us and thus unknowable."[130] Mike Alsford, moreover, suggests that the narratives behind heroism or its counterpart tell us a lot about a given culture, whether it is in terms of values, hopes or fears[131]: in that specific case, Alsford suggests that heroes are a constant reflection of the "American Monomyth", described by Lawrence and Jewett in a context in which:

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[125] Robert Cover, "The Supreme Court, 1982 term—forward: Nomos and narrative", *Harvard Law Review* 97, no. 4 (1983): 4.
[126] Jason Bainbridge, "The Call to Justice: Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State during Wartime", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 28 (2015): 745.
[127] Lawrence John Shelton and Robert Jewett. *The Myth of the American Superhero*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002): 46.
[128] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 81.
[129] Robert Stromberg, *Maleficent*, Walt Disney Pictures, May 28, 2014.
[130] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 83.
[131] Mike Alsford, *Heroes and Villains*, (Baylor University Press, 2006): 2.

> *A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity...It [the American Monomyth] secularizes the Judeo-Christian dramas of community redemption that have arisen on American soil, combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil...Their superman abilities reflect a hope for divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind.*[132]

This portrayal of the superhero as a being that defends what is good against what is evil has been present in mythology for a long time and that Manichean narrative is completely imbedded in the current popular culture rhetoric of super heroes; this construction of good vs evil is essential to the genre and it is through that specific lens that we start seeing parallels with American foreign policies[133] (as it will be addressed in the last section of the second chapter).

Supervillains serve as a justification for superheroes to use their power and is made real "through fabricated fears and anxieties of disorder and insecurity, in opposition to an imagined 'secure' national identity."[134] This need for violence against this "other" after this perceived victimization can be seen both in the superhero genre and in the wake of 9/11.[135] That construction allows for a form of "exceptionalism", which accepts the morally dubious (especially when it comes to the law) behavior of superheroes (it is the same for soldiers and the military in general), seen as acceptable because of its "virtuous" and "heroic" motivations and leads to a certain passivity from society.[136] Lori Ann Crowe goes further by noting that it is hard to miss the similar Manichean narratives of good vs evil in international politics as well as in the security discourses and the policies deriving from them. This allows superheroes to

[132] Lawrence John Shelton and Robert Jewett. *The Myth of the American Superhero*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002): 47-48.
[133] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 48.
[134] Ibid, 87.
[135] Ó Tuathail G, "Just Looking Out for a Fight: American Affect and the Invasion of Iraq", *Antipode* vol. 35, Issue 5 (2003): 116.
[136] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 87.

be "entitled" to a responsibility and even a legitimized authority in addressing this continuous threat (not unlike the "state of exception" described above) whenever they see fit.

Overall, superheroes have a rather special relationship with justice and law in particular. "Laws keep up their good standing not because they are just but because there are laws."[137] The famous quote from Montaigne is probably the most adapted for that particular relationship, and this conception of justice can be seen through another concept: exceptionalism.

2. American exceptionalism

The concept of "American exceptionalism" is usually associated with Alexis de Tocqueville, who defends the United States' uniqueness because of its origin, its distinct evolution socially, politically and economically, its national credo and finally its religious institutions. The concept is also associated with America's "canonical commitments to liberty, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire exempt it from the historical forces that have led to the corruption of other societies."[138]

But, ironically, the concept of "American Exceptionalism" was first popularized through Josef Stalin in the late 1920s. It was used to accuse an American communist group (called the "Lovestoneites") of a "heretical deviation from party orthodoxies".[139] The heresy lied in the fact that the "Lovestoneites" had declared that the U.S. were "exempt from the laws of historical motion"[140] (which was not the case for Europe). That particular event led Cold War ideologues to try to explain why the U.S. was actually exempt from these laws, which also included the Marxist rhetoric: by being a country that was at its core diametrically opposed to communism (both economically and politically), that heresy became a way for American exceptionalism to nullify communism.[141]

The definition of American exceptionalism itself can be described through the words of Robert Patman that defines it an informal ideology with a:

[137] Montaigne, *Les essais - III Traduction en français moderne*, (Guy De Pernon, 2008): 356.
[138] Harold Koh, "American's Jekyll and Hyde exceptionalism", in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 112.
[139] Donald E.Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, (University of Minnesota, 2009).
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles, and also with the conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations. The founders of America saw the country as a new form of political community, dedicated to the Enlightenment principles of the rule of law, private property, representative government, freedom of speech and religion, and commercial liberty. This creed is so taken for granted that it is now synonymous with 'the American way of life'."[142]

Patman goes on by identifying three main key influences in that construction. Firstly, the particular geographic situation of America. One of its main features has always been its isolation which allowed it to stay far from most European conflicts and that until 9/11 never had to get a feeling of insecurity on its own territory. Secondly, the economic situation of the country allowed it to be self-sufficient and even wealthy: the consequence was that it was never dependent nor had to continually interact with other countries. The current protectionist turn taken by the new president, Donald Trump, is a good display of that belief in self-sufficiency. Thirdly, the identity of the USA was from the beginning founded with a largely Christian structure, which allowed the U.S. to, overtime, often justify its actions (such as military conquests) through the belief in its moral and religious rights to do so.[143] For the anniversary of the Constitution in 1987, the then President Ronald Reagan even declared: "The guiding hand of providence did not create this new nation of America for ourselves alone, but for a higher cause: the preservation and extension of the sacred fire of human liberty. This is America's solemn duty."[144] The declaration of Reagan therefore acknowledged the exceptionalism of the United States not only on an internal level, but also on a global basis.

We can go back as far as 1630 to see the first roots of this concept through the *A Model of Christian Charity* of John Winthrop who defined the U.S. as a city upon a hill where settlers sent by God would spread Puritan Christianity, "serving as a guiding light to people discontent with the Church of England. These settlers served as an example of moral behavior to enlighten the rest of the world."[145] Another notion linked to American exceptionalism sees it as the beacon of power who can create a new world from the remains of the old one. In his pamphlet

[142] Robert G. Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 964.
[143] Ibid.
[144] President Reagan, Ronald. Cited in Frances Fitzgerald, "Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War", *Simon and Schuster* 24 (2000).
[145] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 45.

called *Common Sense* (1776), Thomas Paine argued that the settlers in the American British colonies could "begin the world over again" by distancing themselves from the European values and way of living. That self-identification allowed the U.S. to create a rhetoric of a U.S-centered international system, which allows it to expand its values and ideas, seen as preferable and even superior for other polities.[146] This expansion is not seen by the U.S. as an imposition of its values but more of a liberation for the recipients through a more advanced organization politically, economically and socially.[147] This concept is known in political science as soft power, which has been cornered by Joseph Nye in 2003, and it expresses "the ability to get what you want though attraction rather than coercion or payments."[148] This notion sets itself apart because it does not require coercion but instead appeals through culture and a political ideology, and the concept of U.S. exceptionalism can be easily diffused through that power.[149] In 1839, the Democratic politician John Sullivan wrote an article called the *Manifest Destiny*[150] which had as an objective to justify the expansion in the west of the U.S. and not differently, the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 (which was originally used to warn Europe about expanding in the Americas) was later used to justify their own intervention in Latin America.[151] The author Ashley Robinson identifies three particular concepts to explain this construction of American identity: the American frontier, the American West, and the American dream. According to Robinson, the American frontier in the West essentially shaped American selfhood and allowed it to set itself outside of European influence. Furthermore, "the unexplored wildness of the historical frontier allowed for big dreams and bigger opportunities, and the drive toward progress remains integral to American identity today."[152] This emerging myth, in turn, led to the creation of the American dream. The latter implied progress, independence, freedom,

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[146] Arnon Gutfeld, *American exceptionalism: the effects of plenty on the American experience*, (Sussex Academic Press, 2002): 164.
[147] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 45.
[148] Joseph Nye, *The paradox of American power: why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*, (Oxford University Press, 2003).
[149] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 45.
[150] John Sullivan, "The great nation of futurity", The United States democratic review 6, no. 23 (1839): 426-430.
[151] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 45.
[152] Ashley Suffle Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51, Issue 4 (August 2018): 826.

opportunity and security, all for the sake of pursuing the American dream. Therefore, the combination of these three concepts form the "American myth" which serves as the "backbone of American national identity."[153]

This "American myth" can also be defined through another concept: American utopianism. Between the late 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, American utopianism was seen as a potentiality rather than an actual fact. The continent was basically a place where *tabula rasa* could be achieved and the New World could learn from the mistakes of the Old one to build a better world.[154] That utopia was first a dream of Europeans and, with the independence from Britain, it then became America's own. This dream was imbedded in capitalist roots where you had to work hard to make it (an idea that is still very present today).[155] With the industrial revolution, growth and technology became tools that could lead to an actual utopia to create what Howard Segal identifies as "America's civil religion"[156], "unique among the world's nations yet a model for them all"[157] As Mervi Miettinen remarks, the potential utopia mentioned above than became a "probable utopia", "a place where anyone could succeed."[158] Ashley Robinson also associates to this "myth" or "utopia" the concept of American heroism: "if the frontier itself embodied American ideals, then the frontier hero served as the paragon of American identity during the nineteenth century."[159]

It is, however, clear that the United States is not today the embodiment of a utopia (even though some believe it is "the greatest country in the world" and Donald Trump is trying to make "America great again"), and yet that belief is still enrooted deeply into the American pop culture imaginary, especially in terms of its geopolitical incidences. Popular culture serves as a way to revive the atavism of this monomythic rhetoric through what Karin Kukkonen defined as a "conduit of memory"[160] and as Miettinen warns: "the collective contextual memory of

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[153] Ashley Suffle Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51, Issue 4 (August 2018): 826-827.
[154] Mervi Miettinen, "Superhero Comics and the Popular Geopolitics of American Identity" (PhD diss., University of Tampere, March 2011): 52-53.
[155] Howard P. Segal, "Eighteenth-Century American Utopianism: From the Potential to the Probable." *Utopian Studies* Vol. 11, Issue 2 (2000). 5-6.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid, 11.
[158] Mervi Miettinen, "Superhero Comics and the Popular Geopolitics of American Identity" (PhD diss., University of Tampere, March 2011): 52-53.
[159] Ashley Suffle Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51, Issue 4 (August 2018): 827.
[160] Karin Kukkonen, "Popular Cultural Memory: Comics, Communities and Context Knowledge". *Nordicom Review* Vol. 29 No. 2, (2008): 264.

American national identity is still reproduced through the superhero narrative, which in itself is far from unproblematic."[161]

Back to American exceptionalism, it is however after the second World War that the concept got a true boost. In 1950, the National Security Council published a document called the NSC-68[162] (signed by Harry Truman, the then president) which compared to Soviet Union's communism to a "fanatic faith" against the freedom provided by the U.S., leader of the "Free World". The report suggested the use of force and to do whatever was necessary to balance the Soviet Union to defend US interests.[163] Later on, the creation of the World Bank, the IMF and the GATT/WTO allowed to universalize pro-market policies that represented very well the liberal American mentality, and this can also be seen on the security level with the creation of NATO, on a political level with the creation of the UN and the promotion of its specific set of values in terms of humanitarianism and democracy.[164]

After this brief summary of the main historical moments of American exceptionalism, the next part will focus on its depiction after 9/11.

2.1 The exception of 9/11

With the conviction that Reagan had successfully won the Cold War in the late 80s through a particular set of ideas and practices, the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) group, associated with George Bush's victory in the elections of 2000: "strongly rejected the notion of nation building, embraced the traditional view that security was fundamentally determined by the military means of sovereign states, and sought to promote 'a distinctly American internationalism'".[165] Through that train of thought, they argued that it was the responsibility of the United States, after the end of the Cold War, to maintain its international hegemony and to use it to spread democracy and freedom.[166] With that in mind,

[161] Karin Kukkonen, "Popular Cultural Memory: Comics, Communities and Context Knowledge". *Nordicom Review* Vol. 29 No. 2, (2008): 264.
[162] National Security Council. NSC 68: United States objectives and programs for national security. Washington, April 14, 1950. Available at <http://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm> Accessed in 24 July 2019
[163] Trevor McCrisken, *American exceptionalism and the legacy of Vietnam: US foreign policy since 1974*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
[164] John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity: essays on international institutionalization*, (Routledge, 1998).
[165] Robert G. Patman, "Globalization, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 971.
[166] Ibid, 972.

after 9/11, the Bush administration intended to make it clear the United States was still endowed with an exceptional nature. Robert Patman observes that:

> *President Bush merged a Christian world-view with political language to create a new exclusive strain of US exceptionalism imbued with a fundamentalist moral purpose. It was almost as if Bush was saying that to spread American values in a troubled world was to be on the side of God and to resist them was to oppose God. President Bush promised 'to whip' terrorism and confidently predicted that the USA would 'lead the world to victory' in the new war on terror. He said the new 'war' against terrorism 'is the calling of the USA, the most free nation in the world'*[167].

Though unusual, that particular rhetoric found in the American public a good recipient. Bush was well-known for his references to the divine, and it is no surprise that we can see so much of the Monroe Doctrine in the Bush Doctrine, based on "unilateralism, pre-emptive strikes and democracy expansion, it was ostensibly implemented to stop terrorism, similarly to the way that Kennedy sought to prevent the spread of Communism."[168]

The next step in that new international approach was *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, which stated that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones". That particular document allowed Bush's administration to acknowledge a new kind of threat which had to be dealt with through a "distinctly American internationalism" with the objective of spreading democracy in the world through a particular view of the world that reflected the United States' values and objectives and which could be achieved through its power of influence.[169] The document, however, made clear that if the U.S. did not receive the help it needed, it would "not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting pre-emptively."[170] That last remark was not a mere threat, and, after bypassing the UN Security Council, the U.S. launched the "Coalition of the Willing" in March 2003 to remove Saddam Hussein and tackle the problem of international terrorism at its core or at least, where it was identified by the Bush administration.

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[167] Robert G. Patman, "Globalization, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 972.
[168] Ramón Pacheco Pardo, "Guided by Identities? A Constructivist Approach to Sino-American Relations", *Estudos Internacionais* 2, no.1 (2014): 46.
[169] Robert G. Patman, "Globalization, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 972.
[170] National Security Council, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, Washington, White House, 2002.

But the main justification for the invasion of Iraq was the idea that the U.S. can introduce democracy to Iraq, which would be a good start for the entire Middle East region as a whole. That "Civilizing Mission" is maybe the purest form of American exceptionalism to be found but, at the same time, probably also the naivest.[171] The televised address by Bush was maybe the best example of this exceptionalism mindset, when he stated: "To all the men and women of the United States Armed Forces now in the Middle East, the peace of a troubled world and the hopes of an oppressed people now depend on you."[172]

Overall, it is obvious that 9/11 changed forever and univocally the United States of America. Stephen Walt said that the 11th of September had "triggered the most rapid and dramatic change in the history of US foreign policy."[173] That change can be identified easily through the George W. Bush's administration and how it reacted to the event, which could only be defined as a new kind of warfare against a new kind of enemy. Concepts such as "War on Terror" or "Axis of Evil" became common ground in the language employed by the American decision makers. However, it is now argued that this change not only affected the Americans internally in their perception of this new enemy, but the decision makers also made it a habit to use this particular event to justify their own particular status on an international level, as in truly exceptional (if not superior) compared to other countries. The majority of Americans (80% according to a Gallup poll published in 2010[174]) agree that because of their particular history and Constitution, they are endowed with qualities that make the United States of America the "Greatest Country in the World".[175] Donald Pease identified Bush's unending "War on Terror" as the origin of what he calls the "new American exceptionalism", which finds a never-ending exceptional status in that "unending" rhetoric.[176] Pease goes further when describing how the War on Terror's "state fantasies" and its international law implications serve as a way to convince the American audiences that their "righteousness" give them the right to abide by a system which allows decision-makers to form "exceptions to the norms of Europeanization", ultimately having a pernicious effect on the Constitutional balance of power

[171] Robert G. Patman, "Globalization, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 976.
[172] Bush, George W. "Operation Iraqi Freedom Address to the Nation." Speech, Oval Office of the White House, Washington D.C, March 19, 2003.
[173] Stephen M. Walt, "Beyond bin Laden: reshaping US foreign policy", *Quarterly Journal: International Security* 26, no.3 (2001): 56.
[174] Jones, Jeffrey M. "Americans See U.S. as Exceptional; 37% Doubt Obama Does." Gallup.com, Gallup, 26 July 2019, news.gallup.com/poll/145358/americans-exceptional-doubt-obama.aspx.
[175] Jerome Karabel, "American Exceptionalism and the Battle for the Presidency", *Huffington Post*. December 22, 2011.
[176] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, (University of Minnesota, 2009).

by allowing the government's heads to become "unacknowledged legislators" with a monopoly on state violence.[177] The implications on law and justice, however, will be analyzed in the next section.

The famous author who cornered the concept of "Clash of Civilization" (which is also the name of his book), Samuel Huntington, declared that:

> *At the end of the twentieth century, democracy was left without a significant secular ideological rival, and the United States was left without a peer competitor. Among foreign policy elites, the result was euphoria, pride, arrogance and uncertainty. The absence of an ideological threat produced an absence of purpose. "Nations need enemies," Charles Krauthammer commented as the Cold War ends. "Take away one, and they find another." The ideal enemy for America would be ideologically hostile, racially and culturally different, and militarily strong enough to pose a credible threat to Americana security. The foreign policy debates of the 1990s were already over who might be such an enemy.*[178]

9/11 ended that search for an enemy, which was then found in the "supervillain" Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The attacks on US soil, which were soon followed by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the War on Terror that gave these wars their justification, made extremist Islam public enemy number one.[179] But, however accurate can some of Huntington's insights be, he actually justifies, in his book, the violent practices that follow the logic of American exceptionalism: "pre-emptive war", the tactics of "shock and awe", or even the "regime changes" that established puppet government supervised by the United states. William Spanos warns about this rhetoric, which in:

> *overtly naming the "wilderness" or the "frontier" that hitherto occluded the violence accompanying its rationalization and fructification as perpetual "enemy," his exceptionalism also "justifies" the Bush administration's*

[177] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, (University of Minnesota, 2009): 2-10.
[178] Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, (Simon and Schuster, 2004): 264-265
[179] Ibid.

establishment of the (global) "Homeland Security State," in which the (exceptional) state of emergency becomes the norm.[180]

It must not be forgotten that the United States, the most powerful nation on the planet, was completely unable to avoid the attacks on its own soil and the attacks completely changed its point of view when it comes to its own national security in an exponentially globalized world. The attacks showed the weaknesses of a nation defined as the instigator of the "end of history" by Francis Fukuyama[181], a country that had been otherwise seen as untouchable after the end of the Cold War.[182]

What is certain is that 9/11 made sure that innocence was carved out of exceptionalism, and the feeling of vulnerability and weakness after the attacks on American soil led not to empathy for the dispossessed but to violence against them. By founding a state on Ground Zero and declaring a constant state of exception, Bush found a way to both defend the U.S. as an exceptional nation and to launch a crusade of freedom and democracy in the Middle East.[183] By promoting values and principles that the U.S. is not upholding itself, the Bush doctrine might become an antithesis of the U.S's claim to act as a global leader in legal and human rights standards.[184] This rhetoric that transformed the traumatic events of 9/11 into a heroic and glorious "Good War" (which justifies "remedial violence") against terror "mines a deeply embedded sociosymbolic link between violence and virtue, might and right, military preeminence and millenarian justice."[185] These "epic-heroic" narratives have made sure that the post 9/11 rhetoric would be normalized into a permanent state of exception.[186]

To mirror the structure of the first part of this chapter, the point 2.2 will focus on the interaction between the concept being discussed and the concepts of justice and law.

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[180] William V. Spanos, "American Exceptionalism in the Post-9/11 Era: The Myth and the Reality", *University of Nebraska Press* 21, no.1 (2013): 302.
[181] Francis Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man*, (Simon and Schuster, 2006).
[182] Robert G. Patman, "Globalization, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 972.
[183] Donald E.Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, (University of Minnesota, 2009).
[184] Harold Koh, "American's Jekyll and Hyde exceptionalism", in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 129.
[185] Vaheed Ramazani, "Exceptionalism, Metaphor and Hybrid Warfare", *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59, no.3 (2018): 195.
[186] Ibid.

2.2 The Exceptionalism of Justice

Michael Ignatieff identifies three elements of American exceptionalism linked with international law. First of all, even though it was the instigator after WWII of many of the enterprises linked to human rights, conventions and treaties, it tends to exempt itself from actually having to comply with all the provisions through "explicit reservation, nonratification, or noncompliance."[187] This led Ignatieff to coin the term "exemptionalism": the concept describes what is mentioned above, but:

> *Exemptionalism, of course, is not confined to the domains of human rights–related treaties. U.S. withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change fits into the same pattern. Exemptionalism has also been on display in the war on terror in the U.S. insistence that while conditions of detention at Guantanamo and elsewhere will comply with Geneva Convention standards, interrogation procedures and determination of status will be determined by executive order of the president.*[188]

Secondly, the U.S. lives by the concept of "double-standards", which implies being more tolerant of its allies as well as their own behavior then they are with enemies. Harold Koh identifies four main problems with the latter. Firstly, it puts the U.S. on the lower end of the spectrum when it comes for instance to death penalty (putting it on the same level as countries such as Iran, which it has often criticized) and as a consequence it is often considered as a hypocrite. The latter leads to a second problem: it often finds itself in situations where it has to condone these kinds of behavior when these human rights abuses are perpetrated in other countries, even though they had previously condemned them (China's repression of Uighur Muslims for instance, or Russia's war on Chechen "terrorists").[189] The third problem is that it weakens its "claim to lead globally through moral authority. This diminishes U.S. power to persuade through principle, a critical element of American soft power".[190] Finally, by undermining these laws and adapting them to its own needs, the United States is bound not to invoke those rules.[191]

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[187] Michael Ignatieff, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights", in *American Exceptionalism And Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 1-3.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Harold Koh, "American's Jekyll and Hyde exceptionalism", in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 112.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid.

The third and final element identified by Ignatieff is that U.S.' own domestic law prevails over human rights law because of the "self-contained authority of its own domestic rights tradition."[192] This third fact contrasts with the other Western democracies. Andrew Moravcsik describes how the U.S. does not give its citizens solutions to seek remedies in cases of violations of international law, whether it is a domestic or an international tribunal. Furthermore, very few of these international norms have been incorporated into domestic law.[193] It is clear that the U.S. lacks a central instrument to guarantee that these international laws would be harmonized into domestic law. Furthermore, the U.S. senate requires an important quorum for these norms to be accepted in the United States: two thirds majorities are required in the Senate for ratification of these treaties. These instruments were put in the place by the founders to make sure that citizens would not be subjected to "big government or from foreign treaties threatening their liberties, impose exceptional institutional barriers to statutory and nationwide compliance with international human rights."[194] This third point is problematic and quite a paradox: first of all, it allows the U.S. to have a justice system that is "exceptionalist" by definition. Secondly, this system was made to avoid being influenced from unwanted sources while the U.S. acts as the main global influencer: this paradox, again, makes American exceptionalism a core characteristic of its structure.

After the use of force that took place in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, it could be argued that the intervention by the United States could be defended as a lawful intervention due to the right of self-defense. It is however hardly the case for Iraq. The rhetoric used by the Bush administration was not the classic one understood in the international community which accepts explicitly intervention in case of a self-defense necessity, but rather:

> *defense of a more expansive concept of security, a concept wherein the US need not tolerate antagonistic regimes with the potential to harm US interests. The invasion plans represent a view that the United States is a privileged nation with more rights than others.*[195]

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[192] Harold Koh, "American's Jekyll and Hyde exceptionalism", in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 112.
[193] Andrew Moravcsik, "The Paradox of U.S. Human Rights Policy", in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 149.
[194] Michael Ignatieff, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights", in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 17.
[195] Mary Ellen O'Connell, "American Exceptionalism and the International Law of Self-Defense". *31 Denv. J. Int'l L. & Pol'y* 43 (2002-2003): 43.

This exceptional behavior when confronted with the law was particularly obvious in the rhetoric used by Dick Cheney (as it was brilliantly shown in the movie *Vice* by Adam McKay, dedicated to the aforementioned and released in 2019). The position of other governments, however, did not reflect this point of view, and the accusation that the invasion of Iraq by bypassing the UN Security Council was never indulged by the Bush administration, and justifying that intervention might not have been part of the plan of the administration when the invasion was being prepared.[196]

This idea that the US behave differently than other governments has been present among international lawyers for quite a while. It was first made obvious in the 19th century when the US refused to take part in the different wars that took place in Europe, and took its particular meaning in the twentieth century when the US positioned itself as the *hegemon* of the new globalized world, especially after World War II.[197] During that entire period, their attitude toward international law could only be perceived as ambivalent. It was the instigator of a lot of human rights projects and yet refused to ratify the major treaties, even going as far as committing major violations such as torture during the al-Qaeda operations or to discover Osama Bin-Laden's hideout. Treaties such as the Rome Statute and the Vienna Convention were negotiated by the US but, again, never ratified. As a result, "the United States has undermined or seriously weakened the international order it has helped to create and has earned the resentment of countries not powerful enough to treat international law as an a la carte menu- or so it is said."[198]

Michael Ignatieff gives a *realist* explanation to this international exceptionalism of the U.S, which is linked to the nation's global power ever since WWII. That exceptional *hard power* of the U.S, according to Ignatieff, allows them to behave in such a way simply because they can. For weaker countries, these international treaties and conventions are a way to constrain the most powerful nations, but the latter, because of that power, are more reluctant to submit to any kind of constraint. Multilateralism is an instrument for countries such as Canada, France or Germany to actually get some leverage against the United States, whether it is for human rights or international law as a whole, while it is *vice versa* for the U.S. However, the U.S. have also reconfigured that multilateral ideal of international law to diffuse its own ideas

[196] Mary Ellen O'Connell, "American Exceptionalism and the International Law of Self-Defense". *31 Denv. J. Int'l L. & Pol'y* 43 (2002-2003): 43-44.
[197] Anu Bradford and Eric A. Posner, "Universal Exceptionalism in International Law". *Harvard International Law Journal* 52 (Winter 2011): 3-4.
[198] Ibid.

about freedom and democracy all over the world.[199] As Ignatieff puts it, "the United States had no such incentive to surrender its sovereign prerogatives as a state and has continued to regard transnational international law regimes as potential violations of its democratic sovereignty."[200]

This overlook of American exceptionalism would not be complete without analyzing one more concept that is also key to the superhero narratives and, therefore, to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (this will be shown in the case-study): the good vs evil / us and them narrative. The latter has been a constant narrative after 9/11, especially during Bush's administration (it is to be noted that there has also been a certain revival of *Orientalism* as coined by Edward Said, but it would be going too far from the core of this thesis and we will therefore focus on the Manichean aspect).

"Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them."[201] This quote taken from George Bush's address to a Congress joint session in 2001 right after 9/11 sums up pretty well what the attitude of the United States was towards the "other": not neutral. Stacy Takacs argues that the media construction and the particular portrayal of 9/11 let it get completely out of proportion, taking the events out of their historical context and translating them into an unclear good vs evil struggle with the American exceptionalism background serving as a good reason to fight this evil other. Takacs defends, furthermore, that the way "they constructed their terrorist villains and patriotic heroes helped normalize the state of emergency and promote the acceptance of policies of surveillance, detention, interrogation, and interdiction that were fundamentally antidemocratic."[202] Again, this very Manichean portrayal of "us" vs "them" can be found very often in the rhetoric used by both Bush's administration and the media, and can be seen in many of *The Avengers*' heroes and it is linked, as it was shown in the chapter dedicated to super heroes after 9/11, to a need to confront the toll that these events had had on the American psyche.[203] This particular framing of the events dramatizes the context and the outcomes reducing them to "melodramatic, recognizable elements of heroes and villains, good and evil."[204] This allowed, according to Stacy Takacs, to foster a favorable public opinion toward the Bush administration and in

[199] Michael Ignatieff, "Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights", in *American Exceptionalism And Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff, (Princeton University Press, 2005): 12-13.
[200] Ibid, 17.
[201] George W. Bush, address, joint session of Congress, September 20, 2001
[202] Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, (University Press of Kansas 2011): 64.
[203] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 120.
[204] W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 9th edition (New York: Pearson, 2011).

portraying the United States as an innocent victim. The media/TV/Cinema production that followed the events were essential in crystalizing a "climate of fear", essential to the foreign policy decisions that followed.[205] The War on Terror against global terrorism is a direct consequence of that specific Manichean rhetoric used by Bush which, after the events, had a responsibility "to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."[206] These allegations by Bush cemented the idea that the US was necessarily good against the terrorists that were necessarily evil[207] (a fact that is quite ironic if we consider that the plane that took the pictures of the atomic bomb hitting Hiroshima was called *Necessary Evil*). As Richard Bernstein cleverly remarks, "the only possible Good being one that responds to (and defeats) Evil."[208] This "crusade against evil" is linked to the very zealous patriotism characteristic of the United States which sees the country constantly confronted to challenges to their own survival, ranging from the Civil War to World War II, from the Cold War to the War on Terror, and this American mission of war and peace is ever present in Manichean popular culture narratives.[209]

There is also another aspect used through this rhetoric which was already addressed in the first chapter: the spectacle. William Spanos describes how extremity can be used as a weapon by American exceptionalism and he uses the example of the concept of "shock and awe" (used by the Bush administration) which characterizes its "staged spectacular high-tech military campaign in behalf of its exceptionalist policy of unilateral "regime change" in the Middle East."[210] Spanos goes on to explain that using spectacle for this "neo-imperial" project was not the first time, using the example of the colonization of America by Europeans, as well as the staged execution of Osama Bin Laden.[211] Furthermore, these narratives, particularly present on TV and movies, have another characteristic: belatedness which means that "traumatic time, then, is not linear; there is no easily resolved moment post-event. Rather, assimilation happens after countless and belated returns to the site of trauma. A traumatic event is understood only by its recurring circular return, and in terms of the cycle of superhero films of the past ten years, this moment of return is signaled by the recurring image of urban

[205] Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, (University Press of Kansas 2011): 53.
[206] George W. Bush, address, National Prayer Service, September 14, 2001.
[207] Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, (University of Minnesota, 2009).
[208] Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11,* (Polity Press, 2005).
[209] Lawrence John Shelton and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002): 5-6.
[210] William V. Spanos, *Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum: An Untimely Meditation on the American Vocation,* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
[211] Ibid.

wreckage that (often in uncanny ways) approximates the aftermath of 9/11."[212] There is always a delay between a particularly traumatic event and its actual portrayal in popular culture. Jeanne Holland argues that productions (she focuses on another Marvel movie, *Spider Man 2,* directed by Sam Raimi and released in 2004) like these allow for a more complex and newer "vision of a "good", new national identity, and to refine simplistic understandings of what is foreign and "evil"".[213]

Her is another extract from George Bush' remarks on the night of the event to better understand the rhetoric used by his administration:

> *Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature, and we responded with the best of America, with the daring of our rescue workers, with the caring for strangers and neighbors who came to give blood and help in any way they could... None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good, and just in our world.*[214]

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to understand what super heroes and American exceptionalism are, and especially how they existed after the events of 9/11. By mirroring the section's themes (brief history, portrayal after 9/11 and interaction with Law and Justice), the target was to show how many similarities can be observed as well as the continuity between the main American political events and super hero production. Better yet, the objective was also to show how American exceptionalism's consequences in the US' foreign policy decisions were a direct source of inspiration for super hero production, whether in comics, TV or cinema.

As Lori Ann Crowe observes, thinkers such as Aristotle, Thomas Carlyle or George Bernard Shaw warned the world about the dangers of hero worship and of admiring an "exceptional few" (it is also worth mentioning that this rhetoric was also a constant one in the Bible). She even quotes Aristotle (arguably the greatest philosopher of all times) which was

[212] Karen Randell, “It Was Like a Movie,” Take 2: Age of Ultron and a 9/11 Aesthetic", *Cinema Journal* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Fall 2016): 137.
[213] Jeanne Holland, "It's Complicated: Spider-Man 2's Reinscription of "Good" and "Evil" in Post-9/11 America", *The Journal of American Culture 35, Issue 4* (Dec. 2012): 289.
[214] George W. Bush, televised speech, September 11, 2001.

already warning us about these men more than 2300 years ago, describing them as men "so godlike, so exceptional, that they naturally, by right of their extraordinary gifts, transcend all moral judgement or constitutional control."[215] The same goes for American exceptionalism: by creating a Manichean narrative which justifies the impunity of the United States because of the calling of the "most free nation in the world" to "lead the world to victory" and to "defend freedom and all that is good, and just in our world,"[216] it is easy to lose sight of a crucial fact: the United States of America are bound by Law and so are all the other nations in the world, and justifying some unlawful actions through vague notions of "justice" or "greater good" is, in fact, illegal. The staged execution of Osama Bin Laden, just to mention one specific event, is a consequence of several international law violations by the United States, namely the use of torture to get the necessary intel, the violation of Pakistan's sovereignty during the operation that lead to his assassination and the permanent state of exception created by the global War on Terror. Therefore, as Jason Dittmer observed:

> *both superhero narratives and U.S. government narrations of the international realm emphasize the need for freedom of (cathartic, redemptive) action when confronted by corrupt bureaucracies, at least by a select few morally exceptional "superpowers". These "superpowers" serve as permanent (American) exceptions to legal orders - existing outside the law in order to maintain the law.*[217]

Having set the *décor,* the case-study will now focus on the objective at hand: to show whether the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first phase movies truly reflect American exceptionalism in terms of their use of Justice and how it has consequences on international law.

[215] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 79.
[216] All quotes taken from George W. Bush, previously cited in the thesis.
[217] Jason Dittmer, "American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom", *Environment and Planning-Part D* 29 (2011): 117.

Chapter III - The Exceptionalism of The Avengers

Introduction

After having laid the foundation, the third and last chapter of this research will dive into the case-study: understanding whether the four *Avengers* movies do reflect elements of American exceptionalism. These elements can be divided into three categories, seen as the most relevant to this research. Firstly, representations and references to 9/11. As shown in the second chapter, 9/11 completely reshaped both American exceptionalism and the portrayal of superheroes. Therefore, any reference or representation of the event will be seen as a baseline for the analysis. Secondly, references to security or, more precisely, insecurity and the discourses associated with it. The latter is a tool very often used by the U.S. to define them as always being a victim which allows for the creation of a constant state of emergency and, in turn, to violate international law. Consequently, references to insecurity as a continuous state will be seen as a way to justify a permanent state of exception and the portrayals of violations of international law will further acknowledge that fact. As shown in the second chapter, these discursive narratives were often used by the administrations that followed 9/11 (in particular George Bush's administration) to justify actions such as the invasion of Iraq of the global War on Terror. Subsequently, the use of this particular rhetoric in such contexts will be analyzed as elements of exceptionalism. Finally, the portrayal of the super villain and of the bad guys in general. The Manichean, "us vs them" approach was used very often in the narratives linked to American exceptionalism that define the rest of the world as "others". This dichotomization allows for the U.S. to underline its exceptionality compared to this "other", and any reference to this separation will also be seen as an element of American exceptionalism.

The first step of this chapter, however, will be to give a brief overview of the plots of the four movies and then of the six main Avengers: Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Iron Man, Black Widow and Hawkeye. This first step will be necessary to understand the particular construction of each of these characters and how their identities shape their actions, behaviors and discourses.

1. The Plots

THE AVENGERS (2012)

The American governmental intelligence agency S.H.I.E.L.D is in possession of the enigmatic Tesseract which is actually a gateway to Thor's homeland, Asgard. While the S.H.I.E.L.D scientists are working on the Tesseract, Loki appears in the S.H.I.E.L.D secret base with a magical scepter given to him by a mysterious being called The Other (actually sent be Thanos, the orchestrator of the whole operation) and steals the Tesseract from S.H.I.E.L.D. Against this new threat, Nick Fury, director of the intelligence agency, decides to call upon "Earth's Mightiest Heroes" and to assemble a team called "The Avengers" through the Avengers initiative, a project aiming to defend Earth from global security threats that the military simply cannot face. This project was initially motivated by the alien events linked with Thor's arrival on Earth in *Thor* (2011). This team is composed of the demi-god Thor (Loki's brother), the genius billionaire Tony Stark (aka Iron Man), Bruce Banner and his alter ego the Hulk, the super soldier Captain America and the spies/master assassins Clint Barton (aka Hawkeye) and Natasha Romanoff (aka Black Widow). Loki tries to create division and fear among them by orchestrating an attack on the S.H.I.E.L.D hellicarier which only gets the team angrier through the death of S.H.I.E.L.D's agent Coulson. Together and with the help of S.H.I.E.L.D, they fight Loki and the army of Chitauri, an alien species from outer space, that arrived on Earth thanks to the portal created by Loki through the Tesseract. The Avengers defeat the Chitauri and imprison Loki before all going back to their own lives.

AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON (2015)

The second opus of the Avengers series sees the Avengers assembling again to take down Hydra, a rogue secret society of villains by attacking one of their bases in Sokovia, Eastern Europe. There, they take down Hydra's operation, take over their base, imprison their leader, the German Baron Strucker (which they hand over to NATO) and get back Loki's scepter after having dealt with two new enemies: the Maximoff twins Pietro (aka Quicksilver, endowed with super speed) and Wanda (aka Scarlet Which, which has psychokinetic powers). Through the analysis of the scepter (that contains the Mind Stone, which they do not know yet) and its mysterious inhabitant Ultron (actually sent by Thanos too through the scepter) and again

having to face global threats, Stark tries to make Ultron a global peacekeeping artificial intelligence to finally make the world a better and safer place against the threats that the Avengers might not be able to handle. Unfortunately, Ultron gets out of the hands of Stark and takes the form of a robot with its own interpretation of peacekeeping which, in light of all the atrocities committed by Humans, sees a solution in the extermination of humanity. The Maximoff twins, after having joined Ultron and realized what his plans were, decide to join the Avengers against this "madman". Together with Vision, a being created through parts of Ultron, Jarvis (Stark's artificial intelligence) and the Mind Stone itself, they fight against Ultron and his army of drones where it all started, in Sokovia, and defeat him, even though they lose Quicksilver in the process.

AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR (2018)

After the failures of both Loki in *The Avengers* and Ultron in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Thanos, already in possession of the Power Stone, decides to take the matter into his own hands and to hunt for the six Infinity Stones himself. After having recuperated the Space Stone inside the Tesseract by killing Loki (who, in the Phase 2 of the MCU, joined the "good guys") and having left Thor to die in space, he sends his minions to get the Time Stone from Doctor Strange (master of the mystic arts) in New York and the Mind Stone from Vision, who is hiding with Wanda Romanoff in Scotland, but does not succeed in both cases. Against this new threat, Stark, Peter Parker (aka Spider Man) and Doctor Strange agree to join forces together to stop Thanos. In space, the Guardians of the Galaxy save Thor from a certain death and also join forces to fight Thanos after Gamora, Thanos' adopted daughter and member of the Guardians of the Galaxy, warns them about Thanos. The latter, after having kidnapped Gamora while both the Guardians of the Galaxy and Thanos were looking for the Reality Stone (now also possessed by Thanos), sacrifices Gamora to get the Soul Stone, which then allows him to have four Infinity Stones in his possession. While Iron Man, Doctor Strange and Spider Man are still in space, they are joined by part of the Guardians of the Galaxy to fight Thanos while Thor, Rocket and Groot (the two remaining Guardians) head to Earth for the final fight with the rest of the Avengers, in Wakanda (a fictional African land that bred the superhero Black Panther). Thanos defeats the Avengers and the Guardians of the Galaxy both in space and in Wakanda, thus acquiring the two remaining stones and manages to complete his plan, which is to erase half of the population of the universe.

AVENGERS: ENDGAME (2019)

The last opus of the Avengers series directly picks up after the traumatic events of *Avengers: Infinity War*. Only the original Avengers remain with some key allies: War Machine, Rocket Raccoon, Nebula (Thanos' other adopted daughter) and Captain Marvel. After having discovered Thanos' hideout through Nebula, the remaining heroes head to the hideout to confront Thanos and to possibly get the Infinity Stones to revive all the dead. Thanos is defeated and admits to having destroyed the Infinity Stones to avoid further temptations, and gets killed by Thor as a consequence. Five years later, through the return of Ant-Man who was stuck in the Quantum Realm (a realm of the extremely small where time moves differently, as shown in the movies *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018)), Stark and Banner/Hulk figure out a way to go back in time. All the remaining heroes are sent to different eras in the past to recuperate the Infinity Stones which they manage to do with the unfortunate death of Black Widow. With all the Stones reunited, Banner/Hulk revives all the population that had died five years earlier. However, Thanos, who had managed to see through the past-Nebula the events of the future-Nebula, understood what the Avengers were up to and was able to travel to the future with his space ship containing his entire army. It is there that the last battle takes place between Thanos and all the super heroes of the MCU. Thanos is defeated through the death of Tony Stark. All the heroes go back to their regular lives, with the exception of Captain America who, when going back in time to put back the Infinity Stones in their original time/space continuum, decides to stay in his original time with the woman he loved (he was caught in ice during WWII and only awoke in our time).

2. The Avengers

CAPTAIN AMERICA

> *Captain America's ability to connect to the political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy with the scale of the individual, or the body... [He] literally embodies American identity, presenting for readers a hero both of, and for, the nation. Younger readers may even fantasize about being Captain America, connecting themselves to the nation in their imaginations. His characterization as an explicitly American superhero establishes him as both a*

representative of the idealized American nation and as the defender of the American status quo.[218]

Captain America was originally intended as pure propaganda. His enemies were usually parodies of either the Nazis (his most famous antagonist was probably The Red Skull, which represented the Nazis through a red face of death) or the "Japs" (after the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the World's Finest Comics 8 of Winter 1942 - 1943 took a new turn by displaying superheroes doing propaganda against the "Japanazis" with even sketchier stereotypes (see annex 5), which was then seen in Captain America issues in which he fights a Japanese admiral) and he usually spoke in corny catchphrases. Captain America actually became a living embodiment of the American Dream and his involvement as this entity could also be seen during the Cold War, when he was confronted to the paranoia of the red scare and serving as a support provider in post-Watergate America.[219] This role is portrayed very clearly in *Avengers: Endgame* when, after the dramatic events of the previous opus, he hosts a support group meeting in which he provides help to the victims and delivers hope speeches: "You did the hardest part. You took the jump. You didn't know where you were gonna come down. And that's it. That's those little brave baby steps we got to take... to try and become whole again, try and find purpose. [...] You gotta move on. You gotta move on. The world is in our hands. It's left to us, guys. And we got to do something with it." (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019).

After 9/11 (and as shown in the second chapter), Captain America caught a second breath and had a new enemy (terrorists), a new challenge (terror), a new purpose (security). Bainbridge argues, moreover, that Captain America, by acting as a justice figure over the decades, actually started to act as a sovereign figure that lives in a continuous state of exception.[220] The association of Captain America and the state of exception has been defined as the "Captain America complex" by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett. The authors argue that by using non-democratic methods to achieve democratic results (a form of substantive justice) is a way of showing how Captain America embodies the "neurotic conflicts" that the U.S. is confronted with, in particular the Manichean narratives of good vs evil that existed from the 1930s.[221] These wider geopolitical narratives portray the U.S. as a

[218] Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95:3 (2005): 627.
[219] Jason Bainbridge, "The Call to Justice: Superheroes, Sovereigns and the State during Wartime", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 28 (2015): 755.
[220] Ibid, 755-756.
[221] Lawrence John Shelton, and Robert Jewett. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002: 28.

victim and not an intervening nation, while "U.S. moral virtue is reaffirmed through this narrative that presents the U.S. as both a universal and, at the same time, as peaceful and exceptional. This notion of U.S. exceptionalism and the associated "us vs them" dynamic is represented in numerous movies: *Captain America* (1990), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: Winter Soldier (2014).*"[222]

Captain America's body also serves as an "embodiment" of American identity. His angelic looks combined with the body of a Greek god could replace the blindfolded figure of justice as the personification of justice and courage. He first got his powers (this is shown in the movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*) through a mysterious experimentation (the injection of a super soldier serum and the exposition to Vita-Rays) that transforms him into a being with superhuman abilities. In the article *Superhero Physiology: The Case for Captain America,* the authors actually tried to understand what were the probable explanations for this transformation: "It is most plausible that the super soldier serum precipitated genetic mutations and significant alterations in gene expression, affecting multiple protein pathways involved in the promotion of skeletal muscle hypertrophy and improvements in structural and metabolic mechanisms of exercise endurance capacity and body composition."[223] This also raises the question of the portrayal of militarism (the theme of the super soldier is a constant) and masculinity (which is even more obvious with Thor) in superhero movies, and the previously mentioned authors Lori Ann Crowe (2018) and Mervi Miettinen (2011) provide good resources for these topics. Furthermore, Captain America's costume (a blue, white and red star-spangled uniform as well as his shield of the same colors) is also a direct reference to the U.S. flag and to American identity and displays the "best aspects of America: courage and honesty"[224]

However, in *The Avengers*, Captain America is quite lost when confronted to the current state of his country. The movie is brilliant in showing his inadequacy when confronted to a post-9/11 world: "When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won. They didn't say what we lost." (*The Avengers,* 2012). Lori Ann Crowe goes further by identifying Captain America as "being both in a different era than accustomed to [...] but also an old-fashioned soldier accustomed to the old wars of war and failing to understand the new

[222] Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95:3 (2005): 629-630.
[223] Stanley P. Brown, John Eric W. Smith, Matthew McAllister, and LeeAnn Joe, "Superhero physiology: the case for Captain America", *Advances in Physiology Education* Vol. 41 No. 1 (2017): 16.
[224] Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95:3 (2005): 629.

era of terrorism, high tech battles, civilian terrain, and state electronic surveillance."[225] Captain America is and remains a soldier used to follow orders, even though, in *The Avengers*, because of the doubtful motivations of S.H.I.E.L.D and its charismatic director Nick Fury (brilliantly played by Samuel L. Jackson) towards weapons of mass destruction, he begins to question his unfettered fealty. However, at the end of the movie, he gladly takes back his role as a soldier leading the others in battle when he strategizes the last battle:

Captain America: Alright, listen up. Until we can close that portal, our priority's containment. Barton, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or you turn it to ash.
Hawkeye: [to Iron Man] Want to give me a lift?
Iron Man: Right. Better clench up, Legolas.
[Iron Man takes Hawkeye up to the roof]
Captain America: Thor, you gotta try and bottleneck that portal. Slow 'em down. You got the lightning. Light the bastards up.
[Thor swings his hammer and flies off and Captain America turns to Black Widow]
Captain America: You and me, we stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here. And Hulk?
[the Hulk turns and glares at Cap]
Captain America: Smash!
[Hulk grins and leaps away] (*The Avengers* 2012)

These speeches from Captain America at the end of the *Avengers* movies are a constant. Captain America is always portrayed as the moral compass for the rest of the team, as the entity that will make sure that they will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals, whether it is for redemption or justice. The speech before the "time heist" of *Avengers: Endgame* is maybe the most obvious in that aspect, also because of its particular imagery where the heroes are walking in slow motion in a bright white uniform under a big "A" sign referring to *The Avengers* and bathed in the light of the sunrise:

[225] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 79.

Captain America: Five years ago, we lost. All of us. We lost friends. We lost family. We lost a part of ourselves. Today, we have a chance to take it all back. You know your missions. Get the stones. Get them back. One round-trip each. No mistakes. No do-overs. Most of us are going somewhere we know. That doesn't mean we should know what to expect. Be careful. Look out for each other. This is the fight of our lives... and we're gonna win. Whatever it takes. (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019)

It is hard not to think of the trauma of 9/11 when reading the first sentences of his speech. Furthermore, this intervention from Captain America refers to a typical American concept: the concept of a second chance.

THOR

Thor is, however, probably the most obvious example of the masculine / warrior character. The latter was created by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Larry Kieber and his first appearance was in August 1962 in the comic *Journey into Mystery* #83. Thor is typically portrayed as the arrogant warrior with no sense of responsibility that needs to be taught a lesson of humility. This lesson of humility first comes from his father, Odin, in the movie *Thor* (2011) (who also mirrors the events from the comics) which condemns him to be banished to Earth without the main source of his power: his hammer Mjolnir, which can only be lifted by those who are worthy. A famous and revealing scene from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* shows the Avengers having a good time after an event in Stark's tower and Hawkeye teasing Thor about his hammer:

Hawkeye: But it's a trick.
Thor: No, no. It's much more than that.
Hawkeye: "Ah, whosoever be he worthy shall haveth the power." Whatever, man. It's a trick!
Thor [laughing]: Please. Be my guest.
Stark: Come on.
Hawkeye: Really?
Stark: Yeah.
Rhodes: Oh, this is gonna be beautiful.
Stark: Clint, you've had a tough week. We won't hold it against you if you can't get it up.
[All laughing]

Hawkeye: You know I've seen this before, right?
[Hawkeye grunts when trying to lift the hammer]
Hawkeye [laughs]: I still don't know how you do it.
Stark: Smell the silent judgement?
Hawkeye: Please, Stark by all means.
Stark: Never one to shrink from an honest challenge.

This passage of the movie is quite interesting in building the identity of each one of the Avengers. Hawkeye, the spy with a dark past who has seen it all, questions the unreal and magical aspect of the hammer that can only be lifted by those who are worthy. Not being able to and being mocked by Stark, he dares Stark to do it. Stark's interventions in this first passage are quite revealing of the ever-present existence of masculinity in these movies by twice referring to an erectile disfunction.

Hawkeye: Get after it.
Stark: It's physics.
Banner: Physics.
Stark: Right, so I lift it, I then rule Asgard?
Thor: Yes, of course.
Stark: I will be reinstating *prima nocta.*
[Stark tries to lift the hammer]
Stark: I'll be right back.
[Stark tries again with his Iron Man gauntlet, Rhodes then joins him with his own gauntlet]
Rhodes: Are you even pulling?
Stark: Are you on my team?
Rhodes: Just represent, pull!
Stark: Alright, let's go.
[Stark and Rhodes both pull but cannot lift the hammer, Banner tries to lift it as well]

Other than the other sexual reference, this second part of the scene also shows the rational aspect of the two scientists: Stark and Banner. The contrast is very earlier on made clear between the unknown coming from another planet (Thor and his hammer) and the irrational aspect of it. That passage is also interesting because the rest of the movie is about the

dangers of technology in the form of Ultron. However, this dichotomy between the unknown from elsewhere, human behavior and technology will be discussed in the case-study.

[Captain America stands up]
Stark: Go ahead, Steve. No pressure.
Hawkeye: Come on, cap.
[Captain America tries to lift it and it nudges just a little bit, to the dismay of Thor]
Thor [laughing nervously]: Ha ha, nothing.
Banner: And, Widow?
Black Widow: Oh, no, no. That's not a question I need answered.
Stark: All deference to the Man Who Wouldn't Be King, but it's rigged. (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015)

Stark questions again the irrationality of the event and Black Widow, by refusing to take part in this "man's game", shows again how masculinity is ever-present in this universe. The interesting point of this last passage, however, is when Captain America moves the hammer just a little bit. He will actually be able to lift it completely and to use it in *Avengers: Endgame*. This tells us that Captain America, the embodiment of all these noble American values, is actually worthy of the hammer. Furthermore, this shows that the two Avengers embodying the figure of the soldier used to wage war are the only ones worthy of the hammer.

As Anthony Mills observes, it is hard not to see the political context in the construction of the movie *Thor* (2011) and the construction of the identity of the character Thor. In the movie, Thor is convinced about the necessity of a military invasion of Jotunheim and is definitely keener on the use of force rather than diplomacy while Odin, his father, is lucid and patient and sees the attacks from the frost giants (inhabitants of Jotunheim) as the deed of: "a few rogue individuals (read "terrorists"). While modern American leaders such as George W. Bush and Barack Obama, heavily influenced by the neoconservative political philosophy, believe in punishing the many for the actions of a few, Odin, [...] is more conscientious and acts on the evidence, which in no way suggests a Jotun invasion."[226] Furthermore, Odin is more interested in defense than in military imperialism. Thor, on the other hand, sees his father as weak, "an idea that stems directly from the philosophical presuppositions of the American

[226] Anthony Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, Routledge (2013): 180.

monomyth and which has been consistently put forward as a major justification for America's invasive foreign policy, especially where military action is involved."[227] Thor, then, personifies power and even says so at the end of *Avengers: Endgame*: "I'm the strongest Avenger, ok? So, this responsibility falls upon me." (*Avengers: Endgame,* 2019) This dualism between power and responsibility is a pervasive concept of the Marvel universe with the famous quote from Stan Lee, immortalized by Spiderman: "With great power comes great responsibility." As a consequence, Thor, like Captain America ("Let's go get this son of a bitch" (*Avengers: Endgame,* 2019)), is the first to be willing to "teach them a lesson", only inviting more violence home.[228]

In the *Avengers* movies, however, Thor represents the ally of the U.S. and more specifically security cooperation against common foes. This alliance is not free of tensions, however, which is displayed first in the opening sequence of *The Avengers* where Thor fights Captain America and Iron Man for the responsibility of the prisoner Loki. The latter is Asgardian but has committed crimes on Earth, which raises several questions in International Law about who should judge Loki. According to Hagley and Harrison, this struggle shows how the two powers "disagree but are not in opposition" which is a metaphor for the relationship between the U.S. and its allies.[229] Overall, when Thor does accept to leave his differences with the Earthlings behind to form an alliance and because of the events that will follow (the attacks on New York in *The Avengers*), it is hard not to see this as a common and global war against terror and not the usual interstate war.[230]

HULK

Bruce Banner / Hulk is probably the most ambiguous character with Tony Stark / Iron Man. He was created in 1962 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the comic book *The Incredible Hulk* in which, after being accidentally caught in an explosion of gamma rays that bathed him in mysterious radiations, the usually timid and socially retracted physicist Bruce Banner becomes the monstrously powerful and impetuous Hulk whenever he gets angry. He represents both the "importance of science and technology in a security state, as it is his human

[227] Anthony Mills, *American Theology, Superhero Comics, and Cinema: The Marvel of Stan Lee and the Revolution of a Genre*, Routledge (2013): 180.
[228] Ibid, 181-182.
[229] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 122.
[230] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 72.

intelligence, in particular his knowledge of gamma radiation that makes him a useful appendage of the security initiative"[231] and the angry warmonger "emblematic of the imperfect human response to crisis" which is a metaphor for "the desire to destroy anyone and everything that threatens his self-identity, security and safety."[232] You can see in his character the Jekyll and Mr. Hide dichotomy, in which a brilliant scientist transforms into a barely human monstrosity[233] as well as in the King Kong and Ann Darrow relationship that he maintains with Natasha Romanoff (aka Black Widow, impersonated by Scarlett Johansson), Romanoff being the only person that can calm the Hulk down:

[Hulk is breaking everything he can put his hands on]
Black Widow: Hey, big guy. Sun's getting real low.
[Hulk growls, Black Widow crouches and shows Hulk her open hand. He then puts his hand in hers, getting calmer and calmer before going back and transforming back into Banner] (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015)

This scene shows how the hulk can be compared to an animal being tamed by showing your open hand to say that it is safe. When, in *The Avengers,* Loki tries to release the Hulk to destroy internally S.H.I.E.L.D's helicarrier, it does not work because Hulk actually manages to control his anger, maybe then symbolizing the "desire for a renewed American identity in the wake of post-9/11 foreign policy blunders: mighty but controlled."[234]

Hulk expresses the concern about the evolution of technology through scientific discoveries and, more than that, he actually embodies these evolutions by undergoing the changes himself through a transformation that takes over both his mind and his body. Adam Capitanio argues that this narrative is a constant one in Anglo-American culture and shows the acceptance of the diffusion of both scientific and technological discoveries through the most familiar tool of ours: the human body.[235] In fact, we can see that in half of the main Avengers: Captain America, through a super soldier serum and mysterious radiations, goes from weakling

[231] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 73.
[232] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 121.
[233] Adam Capitanio, "The Jekyll and Hyde of the Atomic Age: *The Incredible Hulk* as the Ambiguous Embodiment of Nuclear Power", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 43 Issue 2 (2010): 252.
[234] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 73.
[235] Adam Capitanio, "The Jekyll and Hyde of the Atomic Age: *The Incredible Hulk* as the Ambiguous Embodiment of Nuclear Power", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 43 Issue 2 (2010): 252.

to super hero in no time and Tony Stark, through technology, creates for himself a new heart and a body armor that protects him entirely from any physical threat. Capitanio goes further by comparing these narratives to "mid-twentieth-century American anxieties over military technology and nuclear weaponry, especially in the context of the Cold War."[236] The anxieties of the geopolitical scene (it corresponded with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962) from which the Hulk was born were, in the end, particularly associated with the fear of a nuclear warfare and the "post-Manhattan Project American concept of power" and in that we can indeed see the Hulk as an embodiment of nuclear power, as expressed in *The Avengers*:

Stark [to Loki]: But, let's do a headcount, here. Your brother, the demigod, a super soldier, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend. A man with breathtaking anger-management issues, a couple of master assassins, and you, big fella, you've managed to piss off every single one of them.
Loki: That was the plan.
Stark: Not a great plan. When they come, and they will, they'll come for you.
Loki: I have an army.
Stark: We have a Hulk. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

This scene is also interesting in how the Avengers are being portrayed and particularly how the term "master assassins" to describe Hawkeye and Black Widow is used. Overall, Hulk is depicted as a very ambiguous character between the really compassionate Bruce Banner and the huge burden that the Hulk is. In fact, while he still manages to control the Hulk (up to a certain degree) in both *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron,* he is still feeling extremely guilty about his untamed alter ego and tries to go as far as possible from civilization to keep the Hulk in check while helping the local populations (usually in third world countries). In *Avengers: Infinity War*, this is acknowledged even more when the Hulk actually refuses to come out when summoned by Banner when the situation calls for it (maybe a reminder that this type of power should never be necessary). In *Avengers: Endgame*, the struggle between Banner and the Hulk is finally resolved when Banner, through a scientific experimentation, manages to create a version of himself that is both the Hulk and him. However, when the other Avengers wonder how he manages to keep the Hulk in check, he gives a rather chilly answer:

[236] Adam Capitanio, "The Jekyll and Hyde of the Atomic Age: *The Incredible Hulk* as the Ambiguous Embodiment of Nuclear Power", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 43 Issue 2 (2010): 252.

Captain America: Dr Banner. Now might be a really good time for you to get angry.
Banner: That's my secret, captain. I'm always angry. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

IRON MAN

Iron Man's themes are usually centered around the relation between humanity and technology as well as with capitalism. He made his first appearance in 1963 (around the same time as the Hulk and confronted to the same political unrest) in *Tales of Suspense* #39 by the writers Larry Lieber and Stan Lee. The invention of that character had for purpose to present the readers with what they hated at the time: war, the military and weapons by using a character that literally embodied the "military industrial complex" with immense wealth and a personality corrupted by ego. But most of all, it provided the readers a way to actually question their identity as Americans during the infamous Vietnam war.[237] The MCU's Tony Stark shares the same purpose: questioning the anxieties of the contemporary society, whether it is through "unchecked capitalism", "corporate greed" and "stagnation" or the things he already represented in the 60s. Stark symbolizes a society that is detached from what was its foundational identity, namely freedom, courage, honesty and opportunity. Instead, he exemplifies the current trends where "status and wealth trump dedication and capability."[238] Iron Man, however, represents the hope to travel back to the already mentioned American myth. He questions his own job (selling weapons) and his own identity (thoughtless billionaire and playboy) by trying to return to the original meaning of being "American". Unlike with Captain America, the American myth is now modernized for a new generation and questions America's evolving identity as it "struggles to reconcile its past ideals with its uncertain future."[239] Furthermore, through its technological frontier, it provides total independence and freedom. Ashley Robinson argues that these frontier spaces are essential to understanding and reshaping identity and "with the exception of outer space, new American frontiers are largely intellectual but no less critical"[240], and Iron Man inhabits these new frontiers by not being constrained by civilization or science. His ability also allows him to come and go as he pleases through an ability that probably always inhabited men's dreams, even causing the death of Icarus: the ability to fly. This ability also enables him to live outside the realm of international

[237] Ashley Sufflé Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51 Issue 4 (August 2018): 825.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid, 825-826.
[240] Ibid.

law and the laws of physics, outside the boundaries of modern technology. This constant ability to move and to be self-sufficient is at the core of the characteristics of traditional frontier heroes, outside "social structures, economic barriers, and class conflict, then further acknowledging the important of the American myth.[241]

However, the quick-witted Stark was also seen by Jason Dittmer as a good (yet different) example of American exceptionalism through the use of technological superiority and the "hierarchies of domination it permits" while being portrayed as a man "thoroughly implicated in the military industrial complex."[242] Iron man then raises the question between power and technology. Dittmer argues that the problem lies in the possessor of the power and how it is wielded, rather than the power itself and "by limiting his innovation to a suit of armor that only he can wield, he attempts to guarantee that only his morality is enforceable through resort to spectacular power; this is parallel to (for instance) US government efforts to limit proliferation of nuclear weapons to new countries while maintaining its own stockpiles."[243]

It is noteworthy that Iron Man, compared to many of his "co-workers", is not endowed with superpowers, but rather, as beautifully put by Oscar Wilde: "I have nothing to declare but my genius." The Iron Man comics always portrayed technology as in a constant evolution which we can also see in the movies, where his suit of armor changes more than a dozen times. In the movies, his knowledge of technology became a tool for military technology (heavy weaponry in particular: in the beginning of *Iron Man* (2008), he shows the power of his missiles to a group of military officials and journalists) in particular and a good symbol for private military companies. Furthermore, in the first *Iron Man*, Tony Stark is imprisoned by Afghani rebels while he is showcasing the power of his weaponry while, in the original comics, it was in Vietnam, a proof again that superheroes reflect the *air du temps* in terms of politics. But even though technology was the star of the comics, the Iron Man comics were always as much about the man underneath: Tony Stark. It was always him creating and moving the armor but it was the armor and his artificial heart that kept him alive. Overall, the Iron Man comics were about the dependence of human beings on technology.[244] This theme of the mixture between man and machine was a constant during these years and all over the world (in particular in

[241] Ashley Sufflé Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51 Issue 4 (August 2018): 825-826.
[242] Jason Dittmer, "American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom", *Environment and Planning-Part D* 29 (2011): 122-123.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Jon Hogan, "The Comic Book as Symbolic Environment: The Case of Iron Man", *Et Cetera* 66, 2 (Apr. 2009): 201.

Japan whose very fast industrial evolution was reflected in pop culture, in particular in the incredible *Akira* (1988)).

The Avengers series and the movie *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) in particular show, however, the most important duality between Avengers: his relationship with Captain America. The two characters are always diverging in opinions for most of the movies until they leave their differences apart at the end of the movie for the "greater good". The cynical and modern Tony Stark is a good contrast with Captain America who "represents traditional notions of patriotism and acceptance of authority"[245]:

Captain America: We have orders. We should follow them.
Stark: Following's not my style. (*The Avengers*, 2012)

Furthermore, their divergent mindset "speaks to the tension between the traditional righteous protection of democracy and just war and the new, ill-defined kinds of warfare that test the nation's devotion to civil liberties and human rights."[246] This tension can be seen very well at the beginning of *Avengers: Endgame* when, after Stark manages to make it back to Earth thanks to Captain Marvel, the remaining heroes contemplate the importance of the disaster:

Captain America: Well that didn't work out, did it?
Stark: I said we'd lose. You said: "We'll do that together, too." And guess what, cap. We lost. And you weren't there. But that's what we do, right? Our best work after the fact? We're the "Avengers". We're the "Avengers", not the "pre-vengers". (*Avengers: Endgame,* 2019)

This extract is brilliant in showing the naïve and righteous fatality of Captain America against the remorseful Stark who, again, cannot stand what he sees as past mistakes. This segment also addresses the question of pre-emptive solutions, but that will be analyzed in the next section. This tension between the two Avengers also questions the nature of the heroic, between the technologically advanced Iron Man and the scientifically enhanced Captain America while Banner questions their nature in general:

[245] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 120.
[246] Ibid.

Banner: I mean, what are we? A team? No, no, we're a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We're a time bomb.

Nick Fury [to Banner]: You need to step away.

Stark: Why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?

Captain America: You know damn well why! Back off!

Stark: I'm starting to want you to make me.

Captain America: Yeah. Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?

Stark: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.

Captain America: I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. 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 a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.

Stark: I think I would just cut the wire.

Captain America: Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat but you better stop pretending to be a hero.

Stark: A hero? Like you? You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

The ambiguity and depth of Tony Stark/Iron Man is well displayed in *The Avengers* where he is very critical of the methods used by S.H.I.E.L.D (namely the use of heavy surveillance over the entire world and the intention to use alien technology to build weapons), and all the movies including Iron Man see him on a path to redemption from his "Lord of War" past. Iron Man represents for Tony Stark "regeneration through violence" (coined by Richard Slotkin), which is another way of saying "what does not kill you makes you stronger." By facing and being able to live through violence, Tony Stark conquers his darker self and Iron Man becomes that better self. The violence he suffers is not only physical (the events at the beginning of *Iron Man* but also during the Avengers movies where, even though his armor protects him, he often is the target of a lot of violence) but also psychological, as he faces his past. Iron Man, then, "does what the deeply flawed Stark cannot: he acts within socially accepted morality to protect the public."[247] His sacrifice at the end of the Avengers series is probably that ultimate redemption Stark was so much looking for, and the flower composition floating away at the end of the movie with his artificial heart reading: "Proof that Tony Stark

[247] Ashley Sufflé Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51 Issue 4 (August 2018): 825-826.

has a heart" reminds the audience that he did do his part, but as a counterpart to his past mistakes.

HAWKEYE & BLACK WIDOW

Hawkeye and Black Widow are the two only "regular" heroes among the Avengers, at least the only two without super powers (Stark's technologically advanced armor gives him the same powers as a superhero). They allow for the Avengers series to further the insecurity topic. Hawkeye is a hired/master assassin specialized in stealth killing and that mostly uses a bow as a weapon (in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, we see his sagacity in the face of danger when he tries to motivate Wanda Romanoff: "Ok look, the city is flying, we're fighting an army of robots and I have a bow and arrow. None of this makes sense." (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015)). He previously worked in Eastern Europe (notably in Budapest, which he mentions twice as a common experience with Black Widow) and is portrayed as a man who has seen it all. In the beginning of *The Avengers*, he is turned by Loki into one of his servants thanks to Loki's scepter which can be interpreted as a portrayal of the post-9/11 terrorists being "brainwashed" by their leaders. Furthermore, his role as a dual agent questions the "moral confusion inherent in the role of espionage in the face of 'war'".[248] From *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, another side of him is shown: the family man. This paradox with the ruthless assassin that he is portrays him as a man on the way to redemption and as the same time as a man who carries hope. When, in *Avengers: Endgame*, Black Widow and him have to decide who is going to die to get the Soul Stone, he survives because of his family while Black Widow is sacrificed for her past mistakes, just like Tony Stark.

Black Widow is the only female character among the Avengers. She has been criticized for being a hypersexualized and violent character that normalizes the masculine ethos already present in Hollywood and for allowing the continuity of its imbedded sexism. This topic was analyzed by Miettinen (2011), Di Paolo (2011) and Crowe (2018), among others, and the #metoo and Time's Up movements (popularized in 2017) allowed for a real debate on the topic. It is worth mentioning that, according to a study by USC, 2018 was the most proliferous year in terms of presence of women and diversity in Hollywood blockbusters and these changes can

[248] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 121.

also be seen in the MCU, even though there is still a long way to go.[249] However, to dive further into the topic, the authors mentioned above are highly recommended. Natasha Romanoff is a former Russian double agent particularly skilled in deceiving others which expresses that "manipulating, scheming, and simultaneously beguiling are stereotypically thought of as "dangerous" feminine/emotional traits considered deleterious to the "rationality" of war-fighting."[250] Her ways suggest that, in war, there are no rules and security justifies any means to achieve your goal. This does not mean that the character of Black Widow accepts and justifies her past, and Loki is the first to remind her that she is no different from him: "You lie and kill in the service of liars and killers. You pretend to be separate, to have your own code, something that makes up for the horrors. But they are a part of you, and they will never go away!" (*The Avengers,* 2012)

3. Representations of 9/11

James N. Gilmore observes that in post 9/11 movies (in superhero ones in particular): "something has changed: the city is no longer a site to be saved but rather to be sacrificed; 9/11 imagery is no longer prevented... it is permitted."[251] He calls this constant destruction of cities the "aesthetic of wreckage". If you add the already mentioned "aesthetic of astonishment" provided by the special effects and CGI, you truly are given a spectacle of destruction. As described in the introduction, this use of 9/11 imagery serves as a baseline to justify a reaction (when they do not destroy the cities themselves, the Hulk being an expert in that department) and as described in the first chapter, visual representation does have an impact on its audiences. This destruction provokes anger among the victims and calls for vengeance. Having your city, your home being destroyed is a direct threat to your security and the attacks on the Twin Towers forever implanted that insecurity feeling in the heart of Americans (the question of insecurity will be addressed in the next section). It is argued in this research that the Avengers movies are no different, as, for instance, this intervention by Rocket Raccoon can demonstrate it: "When

[249] "Hollywood Blockbusters Featured Record Number of Lead Roles for Women, People of Color in 2018", Variety, accessed September 9, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/film/news/hollywood-inclusion-black-panther-crazy-rich-asians-1203322123/

[250] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 78.

[251] James N. Gilmore, "A Eulogy of the Urban Superhero: The Everyday Destruction of Space in the Superhero Film," in *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. Paul Petrovic (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015): 54.

Thanos snapped his fingers, Earth became Ground Zero for a power surge of ridiculously cosmic proportions. No one's ever seen anything like it." (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019). The use of "Ground Zero" shows how this event was traumatic in the movie (the genocide of half the population in the universe) and using it as a metaphor shows how 9/11 is still deeply enrooted as a painful memory. For the purpose of showing this specific use of imagery, sound and references, we will use the concept of "9/11 aesthetic" coined by Karen Randell, which:

> *is an aesthetic designed to affect its audiences through its special-effects sound and images. There is in these movies a repetitive set of sounds: helicopter blades; emergency services sirens; screaming and shouting, particularly the phrase "Oh my God"; and a repetitive set of images: aerial shots of a devastated modern city, vertically falling high-rise tower blocks; emergency responders, particularly firefighters; stunned, injured people; people running from dust clouds; falling debris and falling paper. The effects echo and often replicate the images of 9/11 in extraordinary detail in a way that is not see in more realist cinema. It is in genre, particularly disaster and superhero films, that these repetitions can be identified.* [252]

The first occurrence of this "9/11 aesthetic" can be observed in *The Avengers*. In the final epic battle, the Chitauri, a strange alien force summoned by Loki in the sky above New York, attack the Big Apple from above and harm civilians in a setup that is hard not to identify with the attacks of 9/11. As the Chitauri start attacking from above (the Stark tower is at the center of it all), you start seeing the faces of the scared crowd in a traffic jam in the streets going out of their vehicles to find a place to hide, sounds of destruction as the Chitauri are firing from above (in particular the traditional New York yellow cabs which are very easily identifiable), slow motion with vehicles exploding and flying up in the air, screaming families with small children, cafes being blown up (as the typical leisure places) and people trying to get inside the closest buildings to hide. As Loki (in the movie, the typical figure of the super terrorist) contemplates with joy the destruction unraveling in front of him and as Thor confronts him by asking him to stop, Loki rebukes him:

Thor: Loki! Turn off the Tesseract or I'll destroy it.

[252] Karen Randell, “It Was Like a Movie,” Take 2: Age of Ultron and a 9/11 Aesthetic", *Cinema Journal* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Fall 2016): 137.

Loki: You can't. There is no stopping it. There is only... the war. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

These chilling words remind the audiences that from that point on, there will always be a threat to their security, a constant war of terror. Their fight creates even further destruction, with big debris falling from the sky. On the ground, there is mayhem among the crowd, screaming and shouting in clouds of dust until the police arrives with the sound of sirens. As Karen Randell observes, "there is something about this ash-cloud-filled image of the destroyed city that provides and insists on the neurotic repetition of a resonant trauma—unresolved and underexplored in realist cinema—that has a power to affect."[253] The policemen, by seeing what is happening to their city, understand that this is beyond them, and maybe beyond everyone. The next scene sees the flying Iron Man chased by a horde of Chitauri through aerial shouts of the city under attack and the explosions on the buildings as they fire at him, while the scared population observes the destruction from the buildings' windows. As an even bigger enemy (a giant alien looking like a big worm and of the size of a plane, called a Leviathon) arrives from the sky, he destroys an emblematic statue in front of the Central Station (the station itself will be destroyed when another Leviathon flies into it). Even the Avengers, the only beings armed against these threats, are stunned by the events:

Captain America: Stark, are you seeing this?
Stark: Seeing. Still working on believing. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

The Avengers than proceed to help the civilians with the help of the police (the "real heroes"), whether they are trapped in a bus or in a room, threatened by the Chitauri (that particular scene reminds us of hostage taking by terrorists) and we start seeing some evacuation from the firemen and the military while Captain American contemplates the amplitude of the disaster. A dialogue between two policemen even furthers the unreality of this fight, as they shoot inefficiently at the Chitauri:

Policeman #1: It's going to be an hour before they can scramble the National Guard.
Policeman #2: National Guard? Does the army know what's happening here?
Policeman #1: Do we? (*The Avengers,* 2012)

[253] Karen Randell, “It Was Like a Movie,” Take 2: Age of Ultron and a 9/11 Aesthetic", *Cinema Journal* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Fall 2016): 137.

As Bruce Banner finally arrives to the scene, he pragmatically observes:

Banner: This seems horrible.
Black Widow: I've seen worse.
Banner: I'm sorry.
Black Widow: No, we could use a little worse. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

Black Widow refers to Bruce Banner / Hulk's destructive potential and maybe this scene is a reminder that against this kind of destruction, the only solution might be even greater destruction. This becomes explicit when the World Security Council (a sort of metaphor for the United Nations that controls S.H.I.E.L.D: the Council was then willing to sacrifice millions for the sake of security, showing how the latter can be used as a motive for absolute power) decides to send a nuclear bomb on the island of Manhattan to get rid of the problem as more destruction happens with falling high rise tower blocks. As Iron Man is redirecting the nuke into the portal, he tries to call Pepper Potts (his girlfriend) which does not answer because she is seeing the disaster on TV on a plane far away, as the whole world did on 9/11. And, finally, when the portal is closed and the nuke sent though it to the enemy spaceship, Captain America laconically says: "We won." (*The Avengers,* 2012) Rewriting history is a constant in American movies, as the *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) killed Hitler, Rick Dalton and his stuntman did not let Sharon Tate be killed by Charles Manson's followers in *Once Upon in Time in Hollywood* (2019) and *The Avengers* did not let the metaphorical 9/11 happen. In *Avengers: Endgame,* they even go back in time to change the course of their history. Furthermore, as observed by Lofflman, "... post-traumatic stress, civilian casualties, mutilation, or friendly fire incidents are largely absent from the scenario of war fighting."[254] In fact, there are no civilian casualties in both *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and all the civilians that had disappeared in *Avengers: Infinity War* are brought back to life in *Avengers: Endgame*.

The 9/11 aesthetic is also present in *Avengers: Age of Ultron.* Three years after the previous Avengers movie and fifteen years after 9/11, the event still seems not to have been assimilated. The belatedness (it was discussed at the end of the second chapter) allows for the imagery of a destroyed city to be used again and again and shows that the event is still ever-

[254] Georg Löfflmann, "Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security", *Critical Studies on Security* 1, 3 (2013): 289.

present in the American psyche. The "9/11 aesthetic" is present in two important scenes of the movie: in a fight between Hulk and Iron Man as Hulk has been manipulated by the Scarlet Witch and in the end scene when Ultron is trying to destroy humanity by lifting Sokovia up in the air to then throw it back at Earth. The end scene is very similar to the end scene of *The Avengers* described above (the writers were actually criticized for mirroring the end scenes of both movies) and will not be further explored, except to say that it uses the exact same iconography as in *The Avengers.*

The fight between Iron Man and the Hulk takes place in South Africa, but after a scene in the beginning had flown us through New York city in the direction of the Avengers building (previously the Stark building), going:

> *over a statue of a fireman, a memorial reminiscent of the much-circulated photograph of three firefighters erecting the Stars and Stripes on the morning of September 12, 2001, and evocative of the Marines' raising of the flag at Iwo Jima in World War II. By including the image of the first responders to 9/11, this aerial shot of the city signals the close relationship that the skyline image of New York City has with its 9/11 past; even in the fictional parallel universe of the superhero world, we must be reminded that the city is essentially vulnerable.*[255]

This scene was a good setup for the impressive (and very long: more than five minutes) fight between Iron Man (wearing a bigger suit of armor called the "Hulk-Buster") and the Hulk. As Iron Man is chasing down the angry Hulk in South Africa, he first flies over the skyline of a city, which allows the viewers to see the city from a plane's perspective. This perspective is mirrored as Iron Man lifts the Hulk toward a tall glass building which hosts shopping halls (a reminder of the World Trade Center) and as the Hulk smashes through walls and escalators. At the end of the fight, Iron Man even drops the Hulk on an abandoned building to stop his rampage through the city. Randell argues that this scene is unmatched in showing the moment the planes hit New York city on 9/11, while Iron Man's point of view "provides the audience both a thrilling and a terrifying visual account of that moment, leaving little ambiguity about its referent."[256] When Iron Man does drop the Hulk on that abandoned building, he completes his attempt to stop the Hulk by firing rockets at the building which starts to explode and

[255] Karen Randell, "It Was Like a Movie," Take 2: Age of Ultron and a 9/11 Aesthetic", *Cinema Journal* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Fall 2016): 138.
[256] Ibid, 139.

collapse vertically (a reference to the conspiracy theories that believed the World Trade Center filled with explosives, according to Randell). The scene then takes a new angle as we follow the Hulk's fall through the floors, a way to show what is was like for the victims stuck in the building and then an exterior shot of the destruction, with the tower breaking from the bottom, filling the air with a big cloud of dust. The population, wounded and shocked, is shown panicking as the cloud takes over them and debris is falling all around. The Hulk is then shown trying to escape with rubbles and metal strips surrounding him, mirroring the complex and distorted metal structure of the World Trade Center after its destruction. The police and rescue crews then arrive to help the population, accompanied by sounds of sirens and horns. Hulk, contemplating the amount of destruction he and Iron Man had contributed to create, is shown dazzled and remorseful,[257] maybe to show how a perpetrator should feel after this magnitude of destruction.

Avengers: Infinity War and *Avengers: Endgame* do not display as much "9/11 aesthetic" as their predecessors (maybe, again, because the Marvel Studios had been criticized for the structure of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*: the final battles in both movies take place far from modern cities and in places free of civilians). The 9/11 aesthetic is not, however, absent from the movies. When Doctor Strange's New York home is attacked in *Avengers: Infinity War*, we find the same occurrences observed earlier. In this scene, Thanos sends two of his most trusted servants to retrieve the Time Stone from Doctor Strange. The population is shown screaming, shouting and running away accompanied by the sound of sirens and dust in the air as a giant spaceship looms above the city. Cars are, again, abandoned and the fight between Stark, Doctor Strange and Thanos' "children" creates more destruction in the city. As mentioned before, *Avengers: Endgame* introduces time travel into the storyline, which sends some of the Avengers back to New York during the fight against the Chitauri, as a constant reminder of the trauma of that event, as shown by Banner in the beginning of *Avengers: Infinity War*: "Thanos. He's a plague, Tony. He invades planets. He takes what he wants. He wipes out half the population. He sent Loki. The attack on New York, that's him." (*Avengers: Infinity War*, 2018) The events of New York are constantly cited in the MCU, and very often for security purposes, to make sure that, "next time", they would be prepared or, better, they would act in such a way that there would not be any "next time". This 9/11 rhetoric being used as a continuous reminder is a constant in both the American foreign policy narratives and the MCU. Karen Randell

[257] Karen Randell, "It Was Like a Movie," Take 2: Age of Ultron and a 9/11 Aesthetic", *Cinema Journal* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Fall 2016): 139.

argues that, ultimately, "it signifies an inability to find resolution. The lexicon of 9/11, the vocabulary and iconography that exist in the falling buildings and dust cloud, insists on a repeated collection of images that we cannot resolve. We still can't believe it happened to a city that "never sleeps," to a city whose images of shiny, modern glass- and-concrete *wholeness* have populated the entertainment film (particularly the musical and the rom com) for the entirety of Hollywood's history."[258]

The next section will address the question of insecurity in the Avengers movies.

4. Security and Insecurity

Insecurity is a concept that has been used since 9/11 in the U.S.' foreign policy rhetoric. The global War on Terror is a vague notion that allows the U.S. to act as in a constant state of emergency that justifies a perpetual state of exception. This can be seen in different cases such as its intervention in Iraq, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden or the application of *jus bellum* in the case of terrorists, all the latter being unlawful in international law. This behavior can be observed in the Avengers movies as well, as made clear by Thor: "If you believe in peace, then let us keep it." (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015). All the six original superheroes represent a different aspect of the security / insecurity ethos (as shown in the section describing each superhero) in quite a profound way. It is often assumed that superhero movies are not to be taken seriously because of their fantasy stories, and yet these movies and the intricacies they imply between universes and characters are beautifully complex. In the storylines, the world if always threatened by a mysterious "evil/foreign/alien" force often led by a charismatic supervillain / super-terrorist (in our case, Loki, Ultron and Thanos) that the heroes have to fight in order to save the "city/nation/earth/universe" for the sake of freedom and security. This state of exceptions implies that "violence, surveillance, and weapons proliferation is justified by the morally superior (although ambiguous) superhero, their defensive positioning, and the resulting, always victorious ends that avoid any unjustifiable costs."[259] This constant war for security can be seen in all the four movies, as this extract exemplifies:

Maria Hill: Agreed. File says they volunteered for Strucker's experiments. It's nuts.

[258] Karen Randell, "It Was Like a Movie," Take 2: Age of Ultron and a 9/11 Aesthetic", *Cinema Journal* Vol. 56, No. 1 (Fall 2016): 141.
[259] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 88.

Captain America: What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them to protect their country?
Maria Hill: We're not at war, Captain.
Captain America: They are. (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015)

In this brief extract, Maria Hill (an agent from S.H.I.E.L.D) is discussing the situation of the Maximoff twins with Captain America. The Maximoff twins, from the fictional Sokovia, volunteered to be the subjects of experiments by the evil German Baron Strucker (the use of this type of character never gets old) because they had lost everything in the bombings that had targeted Sokovia through Stark's weapons. The objective of the Maximoff, then, was the destruction of the Avengers (and therefore S.H.I.E.L.D, which had created the Avengers Initiative). The latter seems to be a metaphor for Serbia that had been wrongfully bombarded by NATO and when the Avengers do take over the Hydra base, they actually hand over Baron Strucker to NATO. The intervention by NATO in Yugoslavia at the time was, in fact, illegal because not agreed upon by the UN Security Council. However, at the end of the movie, it is S.H.I.E.L.D that saves the day by arriving on their big hellicarrier through the clouds to save the inhabitants of Sokovia. Furthermore, the next segment proves how quick forgiveness can arrive in these movies:

Pietro Maximoff: This is S.H.I.E.L.D?
Captain America: This is what S.H.I.E.L.D is supposed to be.
Pietro Maximoff: Not bad. (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015)

The constant threat is at the heart of superhero narratives and it justifies for them to be in a perpetual state of exception. This constant threat is exemplified in *The Avengers* when Nick Fury justifies his use of Alien power to make weapons by accusing Thor (referring to the events of *Thor* (2011):

Bruce Banner: I want to know why S.H.I.E.L.D is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction.
Nick Fury: Because of him!
[Points at Thor]
Thor: Me?

Nick Fury: Last year, Earth had a visit from another planet that had a grudge match that leveled a small town. We learned that not only are we not alone, but we are hopelessly, hilariously outgunned.
Thor: My people want nothing but peace with your planet!
Nick Fury: But you're not the only ones out there, are you? And you're not the only threat. The world is filling up with people that can't be matched, that can't be controlled! (*The Avengers,* 2012)

The particular event of Thor's arrival on Earth then justifies for S.H.I.E.L.D to do whatever they see fit to prepare for other Alien occurrences or, in fact, any type of threat. The notion of pre-emptive solutions is often suggested in the Avengers movies (as the extract about the "pre-vengers" suggested earlier). *Avengers: Age of Ultron* in particular articulates its storyline around Stark's plan to use Loki scepter's power to create a peacekeeping artificial intelligence to defend the planet against the threats that the Avengers might not be able to face. This dialogue between Stark and Banner (the two scientists among the Avengers that can, arguably, see the "bigger picture") explicate their reasoning:

Stark: What if the world was safe? What if next time aliens roll up to the club, and they will, they couldn't get past the bouncer?
Banner: The only people threatening the planet would be people.
Stark: I want to apply this [pointing at the scepter] to the Ultron program. But Jarvis can't download a data schematic this dense. We can only do it while we have the scepter here. That's three days. Give me three days.
Banner: So, you're going for artificial intelligence and you don't want to tell the team?
Stark: Right. That's right. You know why? Because we don't have time for a city hall debate. I don't want to hear "the man was not meant to meddle" medley. I see a suit of armor around the world.
Banner: Sounds like a cold world, Tony.
Stark: I've seen colder. This one, this very vulnerable blue one, it needs Ultron. Peace in our time. Imagine that. (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015)

This segment has a lot of content. First of all, this alien invasion theme (very present in Hollywood blockbuster movies) is a basic reproduction of the good vs evil rhetoric that suggests a given American innocence which creates an "unambiguous identity of American

exceptionalism and soldierly heroism against the ultimate threatening other."[260] Secondly, it shows that, ultimately, Stark believes he has the monopoly on deciding what is good for the others; in other words, he knows what is best and acts for the "greater good". This use of substantive justice if a constant in these movies as well as in the discourses of the American decision makers (as explicated in the second chapter). Thirdly, it makes it obvious again that the world is vulnerable, constantly exposed to threats which again makes it clear that the attacks always come from elsewhere. Finally, the pre-emptive solutions. The latter implies necessary violations of human rights, although this will be shown later in the series, first in the same *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and then in *Avengers: Endgame:*

Stark: Isn't that the mission? Isn't that the "why we fight"? So we can end the fight. So we can go home?
Captain America: Every time someone tries to win a war before it starts, innocent people die. Every time. (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015)

Captain America rightfully questions the motives of Stark when Ultron gets out of his hands and starts spreading mayhem with his ultimate plan to erase humanity. This passage is interesting because on one hand Captain America is using his knowledge of past historical events to warn Stark of the possible consequences, while Stark wants to anticipate the consequences in light of past events. When, in the end of *Avengers: Infinity War*, the Avengers do lose, Stark's first reaction in *Avengers: Endgame* proves that he was willing to do whatever it took for these threats not to become facts: "And I believe remembering telling all youse... Alive and otherwise, that what we needed was a suit of armor around the world. Remember that? Whether it impacted our precious freedoms or not. That's what we needed." (*Avengers: Endgame,* 2019) This quote from Stark could not be clearer: he was willing to violate the most basic human rights for the sake of security. In *Avengers: Endgame*, Hawkeye, after the death of his family during the events of *Avengers: Infinity War*, goes completely haywire and decides to kill all the criminals he can put his hands on (in the movie, it kills cartel members in Mexico and Yakuzas in Japan but it is suggested that he killed many more) to make sure that they would not hurt any more people, again a pre-emptive solution in the form of substantive justice: "The universe died and you didn't. You won't hurt people anymore." (*Avengers: Endgame,*

[260] Georg Löfflmann, "Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security", *Critical Studies on Security* 1, 3 (2013): 287.

2019). Violations of basic human rights and international law are, then, often displayed in these movies. It can also take the form of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s ability to monitor everyone and everything on the planet through their access to extensive surveillance tools ("We're sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet, cell phones, laptops..." (*The Avengers,* 2012) Furthermore, it also acknowledges that everyone can be a potential threat, even the Avengers:

Black Widow: Are you really that dense? S.H.I.E.L.D monitors potential threats.
Banner: Captain America is on threat watch?
Black Widow: We all are.
World Security Council: I don't think you understand what you've started. Letting the Avengers loose on this world. They're dangerous. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

Lori Ann Crowe suggests that:

> *This ability to shift interpretations of threat at any given time reflect recent tendencies of the US to replace one enemy with another and reveals the discursive power of those in positions of influence to determine who and what get constituted as a threat. It is not necessarily of import who or what is articulated as a threat, but rather the constant articulation of a threat that is an essential part of the performativity and disciplinary practice of a state's identity.*[261]

This, in turn, makes sure that there is always a threat to security, and thus justifies the constant state of exception and the pre-emptive solutions associated with it. This implies for S.H.I.E.L.D to always have access to as much information as possible to monitor future potential threats. This information can also be acquired through different means, for instance when Nick Fury suggests the use of torture:

Fury: War hasn't started yet. You think you can make Loki tell us where the Tesseract is?
Thor: I do not know. Loki's mind is far afield, it's not just power he craves, it's vengeance upon me. There's no pain would prise his need from him.
Fury: A lot of guys think that, until the pain starts. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

[261] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 91.

In *The Avengers*, we also see an allusion to the security dilemma provided by nuclear deterrents as Thor, having been accused by Nick Fury of being the reason why S.H.I.E.L.D was building weapons from the Tesseract:

Thor: Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it... and its allies. It is a signal to the Realm that Earth is ready for a higher form of war!
Fury: Higher form? You forced our hand! We had to come up with some way that we could...
Stark: A nuclear deterrent? Cause that always works well...
Fury: Remind me how you made your fortune, Mr. Stark. (*The Avengers,* 2012)

This extract addresses too topics: first of all, the reference to the arms race during the Cold War. Fury defends his position by saying that the only reason why he was building these weapons was to make sure that he would not be outgunned by his enemies, while Thor argues that building these weapons was actually the reason why they became a threat. During the Cold War, many argue that the decision maker's warnings about the Soviet Union were, in fact, an imaginary tale created by the U.S. to justify a necessary security apparatus. It is therefore easy to make a parallel between the two situations[262]. Secondly, the extract invokes Stark's capitalist involvement with security. This display of futuristic weapons, transportation vehicles, armors and technologies is, as suggested earlier, very present in the narrative of Tony Stark / Iron Man: it is from technology that he builds his power, thus transforming into a superhero.[263] Crowe, in her reasoning on the link between capital and security, quotes Mark Neocleous who observes that:

> *...the security industry both feeds on and feeds the very ideology propagated by the security state (and, of course, a security-obsessed mass media and intelligentsia). The security industry is thereby integral to an imagined economy of insecurity...Security has thus become a strategy for the expansion of capital...this reinforces the logic of security around which the state is organized and helps put certain state capacities in motion, elaborating and constantly multiplying apparatuses of coercion, control and political administration...For as much as security has become a strategy for the expansion of capital, so conversely capital*

[262] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 98.
[263] Ibid.

shores up the ideology of security and facilitates its flows. And in so doing it shores up rather than challenges the logic of state power.[264]

Overall, the security rhetoric is ever-present in the Avengers movies, thus justifying being in a constant threat alert and the state of exception that accompanies it. The moment during which this is the clearest is always at the end of the movies (with the exception of *Avengers: Infinity War* which shares the same story line as *Avengers: Endgame* and is therefore only the setup for the last opus of the Avengers series). After having defeated terrible foes, the end of the Avengers movies never displays the typical "happy ending" that you can find in most blockbusters. At the end of *The Avengers,* the general *ambiance* tends more toward uncertainty than to a feeling of security and when Nick Fury is asked if they Avengers could be counted on against future threats, he laconically answers: "They'll come back. [...] Because we'll need them to." (*The Avengers,* 2012). At the end of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, after having saved humanity against its extinction and having defeated Ultron, the orchestrator of this destruction, this feeling of insecurity is even more present as Thor reminds us: "And these days, safe is in short supply." (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015). Finally, in *Avengers: Endgame*, after having saved half the universe by going back in time, defeated a gigantic army and its overly strong leader, Thanos, Stark's last words remind us once again that we are still at risk: "Everybody wants a happy ending, right? But it doesn't always roll that way. Maybe this time. I'm hoping if you play this back... it's in celebration. I hope families are reunited. I hope we get it back. And something like a normal version of the planet has been restored. If there ever was such a thing. God, what a world. Universe, now. If you had told me 10 years ago that we weren't alone... let alone to this extent, I mean, I wouldn't have been surprised... but come on, who knew? The epic forces of darkness and light that have come into play. And for better or worse... that's the reality Morgan's [Stark's daughter] gonna have to grow up in [...]. (*Avengers: Endgame,* 2019).

The next and final section will address the question of the "us and them" narratives.

[264] Mark Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008): 159.

5. Us and Them

As mentioned before, the Manichean/us and them theme is very present in the Avengers movies. This dichotomy between superheroes and villains shows how much the discourse of security is imbedded in the storylines, through the "hyper-moral" superheroes whose actions (in the form of violence or substantive justice) are justified by their status against these "others". According to Crowe, this illustrates:

> *how a deliberately constructed and then constantly rearticulated myth that relies on the mobilization of difference can function as a technique of security: the exceptionalism of the superhero as a hyper-moral benevolent protector ultimately renders their power and use of force justifiable and their role in maintaining order desirable under the threat of disorder of the status quo.*[265]

Ultron, for instance, attacks directly that notion of the status quo. He was built by Stark as a peacekeeping entity but when, after having accessed all the data he was fed, he realized all the destruction, wars and pain that human beings had caused, the status quo is precisely what he wanted to change and for the humans to evolve:

Wanda: You said we would destroy the Avengers. Make the world a better place.
Ultron: It will be better.
Wanda: When everyone is dead?
Ultron: That is not... the human race will have every opportunity to improve.
Pietro: And if they don't?
Ultron: Ask Noah.
Wanda: You're a madman.
Ultron: There were more than a dozen extinction level events before even the dinosaurs got theirs. When the Earth starts to settle, God throws a stone at it. And believe me, he's winding up. We have to evolve. There's no room for the weak.
Pietro: And who decides who's weak?
Ultron: Life. Life always decides. (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015)

[265] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 91.

It is quite a paradox that Stark had built Ultron to make sure that they would never be threatened by others, while Ultron, after having accessed all the date, immediately identified the Avengers (and humanity as a whole) as being different and the main source of problem. Loki, instead, attacks one of the core principles of human rights: freedom. Furthermore, he uses a fairly vague concept (life) to justify his mission. Freedom is the basis for the preservation of democracy and, in these movies, America is often represented as being the barer of that responsibility to ensure the freedom of its citizens but also of the citizens of the world (as the quotes from Bush mentioned in the second chapter exemplify). Loki, instead, declares that: "It's the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel." (*The Avengers,* 2012). Loki, then, who represents the "incongruity of a terrorist threat who espouses messages of "peace" and "freedom" while creating chaos and war, simultaneously makes apparent the ambiguity and therefore maneuverability of "liberty" and the potentially pernicious link to tyranny."[266] In the character of Loki, we also see how he is dealt with by traditional and modern American identities in the flesh of Captain America and Iron Man. As Loki delivers his speech about subjugation in Germany (a country that, arguably, suggests souvenirs of American might and exceptionalism) and while Iron Man sees the intervention as the work of a madman terrorist, Captain America sees Loki's words as a remake of Hitler's rhetoric, to which he answers: "You know, the last time I was in Germany, and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing." (*The Avengers,* 2012).[267]

Thanos, the main supervillain in both *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (he is mentioned and suggested in the two first opuses as well), displays an even more complex rhetoric, first exemplified in a conversation with Gamora, his adopted daughter:

Gamora: We were happy on my own planet.
Thanos: Going to bed hungry... scrounging from scraps. Your planet was on the brink of collapse. I'm the one who stopped that. Do you know what's happened since then? The children born... have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies. It's a paradise.
Gamora: Because you murdered half the planet.

[266] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 91.
[267] Ashley Suffle Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51, Issue 4 (August 2018): 838.

Thanos: A small price to pay for salvation.

Gamora: You're insane.

Thanos: Little one, it's a calculus. This universe is finite, its resources finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction.

Gamora: You don't know that!

Thanos: I'm the only one who knows that. At least, I'm the only one with the will to act on it. (*Avengers: Infinity War,* 2018)

The rhetoric of Thanos was a very common one in the U.S. of the 50s and 60s where many whistleblowers had made the prognosis that by the 70s/80s, the resources would not be enough to feed the world population, which meant that the world would face famines and catastrophes at an incommensurable scale. Steven Pinker argues that, as for many apocalyptic movements, this ecological fundamentalism is filled with misanthropy, with among other things an indifference to famine, a tendency to wallow in macabre fantasies of a depopulated planet and a propensity to comparisons that remind us of Nazism, associating human beings as parasites or even as cancers. He goes on to quote Paul Watson, from the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society NGO who suggested to radically and judiciously reduce the human population to less than one billion individuals.[268] At least, Thanos, wants to erase only half of the population, a proof if one was needed that reality is often worse than fiction.

Thanos is, still, as close as a definition gets to extremism and even though everyone is mobilized to fight him, his higher purpose makes him quite an ambiguous character. But while his aspect could be associated with that of an enlightened yet mad predicator, his followers are all monstrous, repulsive and scary. Some have four arms and sharp teeth, others are disformed and enormous, some are the Chitauri that had attacked New York a few years earlier and the powers they wield are generally evil (the scene of torture in *Avengers: Endgame* is particularly brutal when Thanos' most trusted servant penetrates needles in the body of Doctor Strange). Loki is presented as a master of mischief through his manipulative powers (his use of trickery is often portrayed as unethical because of the joy it procures him and the satisfaction he sees in war), unimpressive physically and having malevolent traits, whether it is jealousy or his strive for power. He seeks recognition of his power (as showcased in the aforementioned quotes), is vain in his perseverance and "intoxicated by his own inflated sense of power, self-

[268] Steven Pinker, *Le Triomphe des Lumières: Pourquoi il faut Défendre la Raison, la Science et l'Humanisme,* (Les arènes, 2018): 148-149.

worth and entitlement ("There are NO men like ME!" (*The Avengers,* 2012))."[269] Overall, he is portrayed as a terrorist, whether it is by others (S.H.I.E.L.D differentiating him from both superheroes and humans), by his discourses (as shown above) or his actions, which seek to "divide, to terrify, and to unleash anger and hatred that decimates the previous harmony of a group and demands revenge."[270] Ultron is different yet portrayed as evil as well. His dark and oversized robotic appearance with red glowing eyes uses stereotypes of villains' portrayals and dives into the fear of technology (whether it is artificial intelligence, drones or surveillance) of the audiences (it is hard not to think of a Terminator when seeing Ultron). Furthermore, and as already mentioned above, his seemingly divine "mission" (not very different from Thanos') is an attempt to destroy what humans are (read westerners) as this passage shows: "You wanna protect the world but you don't want it changed. How is humanity saved if it's not allowed to evolve? [...] There's only one path to peace. The Avenger's extinction." (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015) This type of rhetoric is often associated with that of terrorists, who are often portrayed as wanting to destroy the Westerner's ways (the 2015 attacks of the Bataclan in Paris targeted leisure symbols, whether it was the concert hall where the Eagles of Death Metal were playing or the bars and the World Trade Center was seen as a metaphor for the Western liberal world). This last extract will show the extremism of Thanos who, up to a certain point, could be seen as reasonable in his mission, until he reveals his true nature before the last battle of the Avengers series:

Thanos: You could not live with your own failure. Where did that bring you? Back to me. I thought by eliminating half of life... the other half would thrive. But you've shown me... that's impossible. And as long as there are those who remember what was... there will always be those that are unable to accept what can be. They will resist.
Stark: Yep. We're all kind of stubborn.
Thanos: I'm thankful. Because now... I know what I must do. I will shred this universe... down to its last atom. And then... with the stones you've collected for me... create a new one... teeming with life... that knows not what it has lost... but only what it has been given. A grateful universe.
Captain America: Born out of blood.
Thanos: They'll never know it. (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019)

[269] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018): 85.
[270] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles we Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities", *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no.1 (2014): 122.

This acknowledgment by Stark of human's flaws is a constant in superheroes movies (we can see it in Vision's observation: "Humans are odd. They think order and chaos are somehow opposites and try to control what won't be. But there is grace in their failings. I think you missed that." (*Avengers: Age of Ultron,* 2015)). This tendency is a constant reminder that mistakes are to be forgiven and whatever superheroes and the Avengers in particular might have done in the past (whether it was destroying, killing, invading or breaking laws), there is always redemption and forgiveness in the end. Maybe the ultimate fantasy of superheroes and American exceptionalism is to rewrite history and, if that is not possible, to be forgiven for all their justifiable sins.

Conclusion

The structure of this last chapter was intended to first have an overview of the plots of the movies, to then understand the construction of each character and how this construction reflected America's situation at each time (Captain America punching Hitler in WWII, Iron Man coming out during the Vietnam war or Hulk's atomic power during the Cuba missile crisis) and finally to see how American exceptionalism can be observed in the Avengers movies. That last section focused firstly on the "9/11 aesthetic" and the references associated to it, secondly on the security aspect of American exceptionalism and how its elements can be seen in the movies (through substantive justice, the state of exception, the insecurity rhetoric and the violations of international law) and, finally, on the Manichean/alien/us and them narratives. Overall, it was found that elements of American exceptionalism can indeed be found in the Avengers movies and, moreover, it is argued that the actions, behavior and discourses linked with American exceptionalism were a direct source of inspiration for the movies.

Conclusion

This research started with the question: "How do the four Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism?" To answer this question, three chapters were dedicated to analyze every aspect of the problem, from the general context to specific dialogues and behaviors in each movie. The four movies analyzed were *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). These movies are, first of all, fully integrated into pop culture because of their success and all the consumption potential they create. Secondly, because of the huge investment that their production requires (*Avengers: Endgame* is the most expensive movie ever made and a large portion of the production costs are attributed to special effects and CGI), their visual aspect is crucial. By first analyzing the relationship between popular culture and international relations, the intent was, then, to show that pop culture is, in fact, relevant for academic analysis. And, more than relevant, we suggest through the analysis that pop culture is even necessary to understand certain aspects of international relations. By also analyzing the effects of visual representations, the objective was to demonstrate that visual representations have an impact on audiences, whether it is through an "aesthetic of astonishment" or the messages these images carry. Comparatively to the current awareness of these topics in the existing literature, this general contextualization does not add any new knowledge, except for the fact that it is applied to movies that were never analyzed through this lens before.

The choice of constructivism as the theoretical approach, however, allowed to come up with several findings. First of all, it allowed to show that the construction of superheroes' identities was deeply interconnected with the U.S.' behaviors, actions and discourses in terms of politics and identities on both an internal and external scale (whether it is Hulk's birth during the Cuba Missile Crisis and the fear of a nuclear winter, Iron Man's creation during the Vietnam War or Captain America punching Hitler). Furthermore, we argue that the U.S. administrations' (in particular George Bush's) actions, behaviors and discourses actually influenced superhero production. Secondly and as an extension to the first point, we suggest that elements of American exceptionalism can be found in superhero production and are, again, a source of inspiration for superhero production. This was mostly developed in the second chapter, which analyzed the main themes that are superheroes and American exceptionalism. By mirroring the sections of the two concepts, it was shown that there are a lot of similarities that can be observed, in particular in terms of representations of 9/11, insecurity and Manicheanism. While

the current literature on the subject generally focuses on one of these aspects, this thesis allows to show the logical interconnection that exists between each one of these concepts and how they link together superheroes and American exceptionalism.

The most original findings, however, can be found in the third chapter. Using constructivism to analyze each Avenger's identity (through their history as well as the ideas associated with it, their actions, their behaviors and their discourses), this allowed to understand their portrayal in every one of the movies analyzed. Furthermore, except for *The Avengers*, the three other movies had never been analyzed under the lens of American exceptionalism, which made their analysis completely original.

In this last chapter, then, the three hypotheses were tested. We have found that the first hypothesis, that suggests the presence of American exceptionalism in terms of representations of 9/11, can be found in the four Avengers movies, even if more importantly in the first two movies. We therefore conclude that in the first two movies, *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron,* the hypothesis is validated while in last two movies, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame,* the hypothesis is only partially validated. We have observed that the second hypothesis, suggesting the existence of American exceptionalism in terms of the insecurity rhetoric, can be seen in all movies except for *Avengers: Infinity War*. The movie serves, in the saga, as the setup for the last movie, which explains its particular structure. Consequently, the hypothesis is invalidated for this movie and validated for the three others. Finally, we determined that the third hypothesis, which suggests the presence of American exceptionalism in terms of Manicheanism, can be validated in all four movies. Except for *The Avengers*, the findings in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* are all original, and therefore contribute to the current knowledge and literature.

However, there are other aspects that could have been added to this research but who were seen as less relevant in the choice of the subject. These aspects are militarism, gender and technology. These three topics have been tackled in the literature on superheroes and can be identified as the limits of this research; however, we made the decision to focus on representations of 9/11, insecurity and Manicheanism that we saw as more in line with the concept of American exceptionalism.

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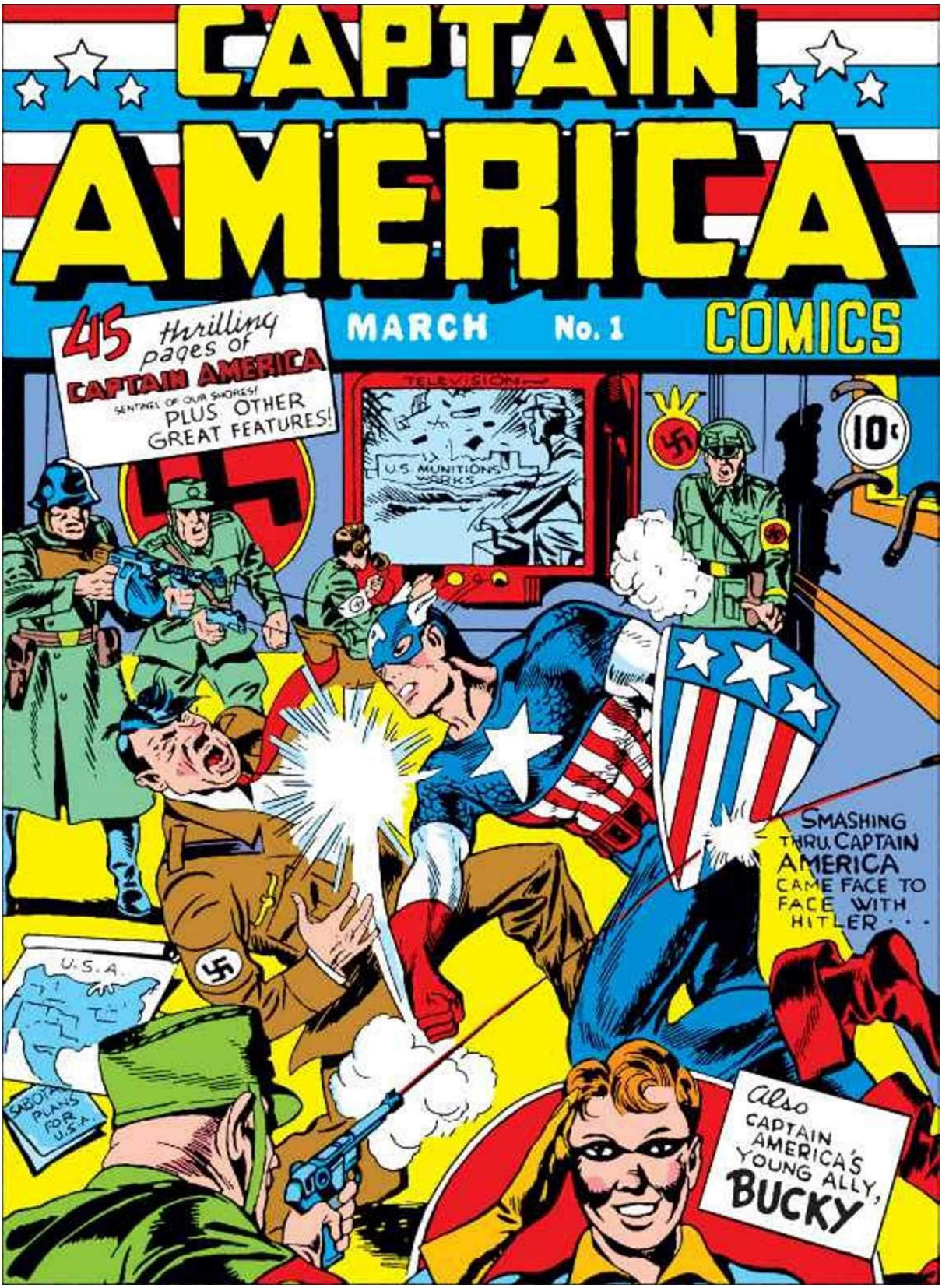
Appendix

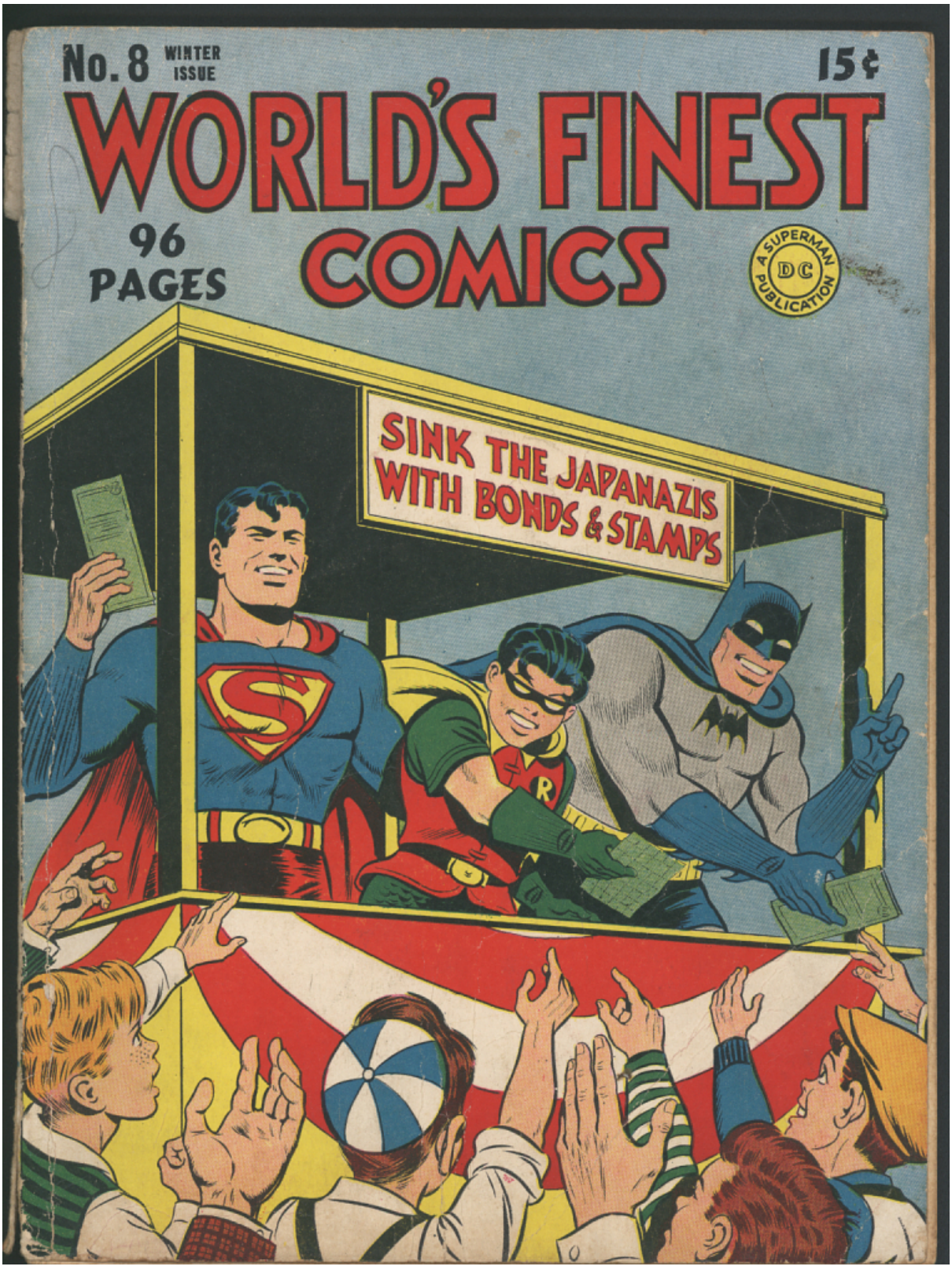
Annex 1 - Propaganda during the red fear

Annex 2 - Spring-Heel'd Jack, the first superhero



Annex 3 - The cover of *Captain America Comics #1* (1941). © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved

Annex 4 - Captain America's speech against terror in *Captain America: Enemy, Part One: Dust* (Vol. 4 #1, June, 2002) © Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved



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SUMMARY

Superhero movies and TV shows in particular have witnessed a boom ever since the beginning of the 21st century and the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a good example for it: is the most successful franchise of all times. With 28 movies and counting, starting in 2008 with the release of the first *Iron Man*, the franchise leaves far behind benchmarks such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or even *James Bond*. But the super hero blockbuster success did not start with the Marvel Cinematic Universe: *Spider Man 2*, released in 2004, rose to be the fifth highest grossing movie of all time[1] and with the release of Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy with its first instalment in 2005, the film industry (and the American one in particular) has ever since seen a very important surge in super hero movies.[2] Between 1978 and 2015, more than a hundred super hero movies were released, more than a third of them in the 10 years following 9/11 and between Marvel and DC Comics, dozens more are bound to be released by 2022. This research project was inspired by this current trend. Actually, it was inspired by the increasing production of movie and TV shows in general. The fact is that the future will witness an exponential production of movies and tv shows because of a simple thing: automatization. Take for instance self-driven cars: it will mean that audiences will have even more time on their hands to watch Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube, Apple + or even Facebook productions. All the GAFA companies understood that there is a big market for visual production and we can now see the trailers for their new (big budget) productions. This demand from audiences can already be seen in public transports: it has become rare to see someone reading a newspaper while it has become ordinary to see someone watching a show on their smartphone. The super hero movie industry is extremely profitable: if we analyze the top 10 movies with the highest gross of all times, we can see that four of them are part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (they are, in fact, the four *Avengers* movies), the newly released *Avengers: Endgame* even grabbing the first spot with a staggering $2,796 billion.[3] Moreover, the 2019 Forbes magazine published the ranking of the highest paid actors in Hollywood, which includes five actors (namely Chris Evans, Paul Rudd, Robert Downey Jr, Chris Hemsworth and Bradley Cooper)[4] from the

[1] Jeanne Holland, "It's Complicated: Spider-Man 2's Reinscription of "Good" and "Evil" in Post-9/11 America", *The Journal of American Culture 35, Issue 4* (Dec. 2012): 289.
[2] James Mulder, “Believe It or Not, This is Power: Embodied Crisis and the Superhero on Film", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50 (2017): 1047.
[3] "Worldwide Gross," All Time Box Office, Box Office Mojo, accessed August 22, 2019, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/
[4] "The Highest-Paid Actors 2019: Dwayne Johnson, Bradley Cooper and Chris Hemsworth", Forbes, accessed August 24, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2019/08/21/the-highest-paid-actors-2019-dwayne-johnson-bradley-cooper-and-chris-hemsworth/#3116344c2b96

Avengers: Endgame movie while Scarlett Johansson (an *Avenger* as well) takes the first spot as the highest paid actress.[5]

The beginning of the 21st century also corresponds with one of the most (if not THE most) traumatic event in American history: 9/11. So, this raises a question in the fields of political science and international relations: does popular culture interact with these fields and, if they do, how do they interact with these fields? It is only recently that popular culture started being truly analyzed in international relations, political science and international law, even though there is still a long way to go: popular culture was often seen as "not serious" and not a real source of academic content. Authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Saunders, Kyle Grayson or Simon Philpott, however, realized that these fields and popular culture could not be dissociated.[6] Saunders, for instance, said that "cultural production is an important part of how international relations is conceived"[7] and Grayson added that "popular culture makes world politics what it is".[8] The first chapter therefore aims at understanding the general context that breeds superheroes. It does so firstly by focusing on popular culture as a whole and how it relates to international relations. This was necessary because pop culture is rarely what is thought of when it comes to understanding the complexities of world politics. What is argued here is therefore that pop culture reflects political events and that, because of its immense popularity, it has to be seen as a relevant source of studies. This does not mean, however, that pop culture provides more information than academic sources, far from it, but rather that pop culture's influence on its audience should be seen as a given.

Furthermore, popular culture is, today, mostly consumed through visual representation (music is also, very often, accompanied by video clips) of what Guy Debord called the "spectacle", that "extreme, visual-oriented and calculative mode of representation, fundamental to the West but consummated in the democratic capitalism of the modern age, that, in substituting the "simulacral" image for temporal worldly reality, has as it's essential purpose to

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[5] "The Highest-Paid Actresses 2019: Scarlett Johansson Leads with $56 Million", Forbes, accessed August 24, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maddieberg/2019/08/23/highest-paid-actresses-scarlett-johansson/#4606265b4b4d

[6] Lori Ann Crowe, "Militarism, Security, And War: The Politics of Contemporary Hollywood Superheroes" (PhD diss., York University, 2018)

[7] Robert A. Saunders. "'The Interview' and the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum." E-International Relations (December 23, 2014), accessed August 22, 2019. http://www.e-ir.info/2014/12/23/situating-the-interview-within-the-popular-culture-world-politics-continuum/.

[8] Kyle Grayson, "The Rise of Popular Culture in IR: Three Issues", E-International Relations (January 30, 2015), accessed August 22, 2019. http://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/30/the-rise-of-popular-culture-in-ir-three-issues/#.

strike [the spectator] dumb."[9] We therefore argue that visual representation through pop culture provides a medium that is a lot more user-friendly in terms of complexity and accessibility. How many people knew the actual intricacies of the crisis of 2008 before the movie *The Big Short*? How many people will understand the implications of Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the Trump's 2017 campaign through the Netflix documentary *The Great Hack*? And how many people actually knew who Dick Chenney was before the movie *Vice*? It would be impossible to quantify these assumptions, but we would argue that these key political events can now be comprehended a lot more through these movies and documentaries.

The second objective of the first chapter was to draft the academic framework of this research. This was achieved through the constructivist theoretical approach which underlined the importance of the construction of identities and the centrality of agents. The theory is essential in understanding how the U.S. identity was built as exceptional, thus shaping superheroes' own identities in that particular context. The idea for this choice stems from the two main topics of this research: American exceptionalism and superheroes. Constructivism, by trying to understand how ideas form identities, allows for an empirical and interpretive analysis of how these identities shape actions, behaviors and discourses. In the case of American exceptionalism, it permits to comprehend how concepts such as the American Myth, the American Utopia or the American Dream built American identities and therefore how these identities modulated actions, behaviors and discourses after 9/11. In the case of superheroes (the Avengers in particular), constructivism allows first of all to understand the context in which they were imagined and conceived and then to see how their identity determined how they behaved in the Avengers movies. To conduct this analysis, the primary source was, then, the Avengers movies which was completed with a qualitative content analysis.

The second chapter dives into the core of the subject by trying to understand what superheroes and American exceptionalism are. To better understand the general appeal for *ubermensch*, the first part of the second chapter therefore puts the emphasis on super heroes, initially drafting a brief history of superheroes and their representations over time in popular culture, how they reflect the *air du temps*, going from the ancient Greeks (and Homer in particular through his portrayal of the Greek man) to the Cold War and what their core characteristics are. Following that brief overview, the next section has a particular interest in the post 9/11 presence of these *ubermensch*. 9/11 was a particularly traumatic event for the

[9] William V. Spanos, *Redeemer Nation in the Interregnum: An Untimely Meditation on the American Vocation,* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

American psyche and had huge repercussions, whether it was in politics or in culture. The objective of that second section was therefore to analyze that representation of super heroes after 9/11 compared to the "real heroes" and how the super hero genre witnessed a revival, as it often did after meaningful political events. The particular relationship with law and justice that superheroes have is then analyzed, and particularly how that relation can be a challenge to the State's sovereignty in Carl Schmitt's "state of exception".

The next part of the second chapter focuses on American exceptionalism, by first addressing the general history of the concept, going from Alexis de Tocqueville to the United States promoting itself as a global leader after WWII. In the following section, mirroring the super hero part, the target was to analyze American exceptionalism after 9/11 and how it witnessed a revival especially through Bush's administration with the unlawful invasion of Iraq and the global War on Terror. Finally, the complicated relation between American exceptionalism and international law is analyzed and, more specifically, how the Manichean rhetoric used by the Bush administration created a confusion between justice and law, shaping the cinematic production that followed. The objective of this chapter was, then, to understand what super heroes and American exceptionalism are, and especially how they existed after the events of 9/11. By mirroring the section's themes (brief history, portrayal after 9/11 and interaction with Law and Justice), the target was to show how many similarities can be observed as well as the continuity between the main American political events and super hero production. Better yet, the objective was also to show how American exceptionalism's consequences in the US' foreign policy decisions were a direct source of inspiration for super hero production, whether in comics, TV or cinema.

The concept of superhero uses the definition of Peter Coogan:

> *A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often*

> *superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. – superheroic, adj. Also super hero, super-hero.*[10]

The concept of American exceptionalism uses the definition of Robert Patman, which sees American exceptionalism as a belief in the:

> *pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country's founding liberal principles, and also with the conviction that the USA has a special destiny among nations. The founders of America saw the country as a new form of political community, dedicated to the Enlightenment principles of the rule of law, private property, representative government, freedom of speech and religion, and commercial liberty. This creed is so taken for granted that it is now synonymous with 'the American way of life'.* [11]

The case-study is developed in the third chapter to answer the research question of this thesis: "How do the four Avengers movies reflect American Exceptionalism?" The four movies were released respectively in 2012 (*The Avengers*), 2015 (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*), 2018 (*Avengers: Infinity War*) and 2019 (*Avengers: Endgame)* and are all among the ten most successful movies of all times, which justifies to analyze the structure of these money-machine blockbusters. The structure of this last chapter is divided into three parts. The first one provides an overview of the plots of the four movies. The second part is intended to analyze the construction of each character and how this construction reflected America's situation at each time (Captain America punching Hitler in 1941, Iron Man coming out during the Vietnam war or Hulk's atomic power during the Cuba missile crisis): each one of the six avengers brings to the table a certain aspect of exceptionalism.

Captain America was originally intended as pure propaganda. His enemies were usually parodies of either the Nazis (his most famous antagonist was probably The Red Skull, which represented the Nazis through a red face of death) or the "Japs" (after the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the World's Finest Comics 8 of Winter 1942 - 1943 took a new turn by displaying superheroes doing propaganda against the "Japanazis" with even sketchier stereotypes which was then seen in Captain America issues in which he fights a Japanese

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[10] Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, (Monkey Brain Books, 2006).
[11] Robert G. Patman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror", *Third World Quarterly* 27 no.6 (2006): 964.

admiral) and he usually spoke in corny catchphrases. After 9/11, Captain America caught a second breath and had a new enemy (terrorists), a new challenge (terror), a new purpose (security).

Thor is, however, probably the most obvious example of the masculine / warrior character. The latter was created by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Larry Kieber and his first appearance was in August 1962 in the comic *Journey into Mystery* #83. Thor is typically portrayed as the arrogant warrior with no sense of responsibility that needs to be taught a lesson of humility.

Bruce Banner / Hulk is probably the most ambiguous character with Tony Stark / Iron Man. He was created in 1962 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in the comic book *The Incredible Hulk* in which, after being accidentally caught in an explosion of gamma rays that bathed him in mysterious radiations, the usually timid and socially retracted physicist Bruce Banner becomes the monstrously powerful and impetuous Hulk whenever he gets angry.

Iron Man's themes are usually centered around the relation between humanity and technology as well as with capitalism. He made his first appearance in 1963 (around the same time as the Hulk and confronted to the same political unrest) in *Tales of Suspense* #39 by the writers Larry Lieber and Stan Lee. The invention of that character had for purpose to present the readers with what they hated at the time: war, the military and weapons by using a character that literally embodied the "military industrial complex" with immense wealth and a personality corrupted by ego. But most of all, it provided the readers a way to actually question their identity as Americans during the infamous Vietnam war.[12]

Hawkeye and Black Widow are the two only "regular" heroes among the Avengers, at least the only two without super powers (Stark's technologically advanced armor gives him the same powers as a superhero). They allow for the Avengers series to further the insecurity topic. Hawkeye is a hired/master assassin specialized in stealth killing and that mostly uses a bow as a weapon. He previously worked in Eastern Europe (notably in Budapest, which he mentions twice as a common experience with Black Widow) and is portrayed as a man who has seen it all. Black Widow is the only female character among the Avengers. She has been criticized for being a hypersexualized and violent character that normalizes the masculine ethos already present in Hollywood and for allowing the continuity of its imbedded sexism. Her ways suggest that, in war, there are no rules and security justifies any means to achieve your goal.

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[12] Ashley Sufflé Robinson, "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films", *The Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 51 Issue 4 (August 2018): 825.

Finally, the third part dives into the analysis of the movies, to see how American exceptionalism can be observed in the Avengers movies. To the research question, there are three main hypotheses: the first one argues that the Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism in terms of representations of 9/11. As shown in the second chapter, 9/11 completely reshaped both American exceptionalism and the portrayal of superheroes. Therefore, any reference or representation of the event is seen as a baseline for the analysis. By representations of 9/11, we intend both references to the event and the aesthetic associated with it. The second hypothesis suggests that the Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism in terms of security. The latter is a tool very often used by the U.S. to define them as always being a victim which allows for the creation of a constant state of emergency and, in turn, to violate international law. The global War on Terror is a vague notion that allows the U.S. to act as in a constant state of emergency that justifies a perpetual state of exception. This can be seen in different cases such as its intervention in Iraq, the assassination of Osama Bin Laden or the application of *jus bellum* in the case of terrorists, all the latter being unlawful in international law. Consequently, references to insecurity as a continuous state is seen as a way to justify a permanent state of exception and the portrayals of violations of international law will further acknowledge that fact. As shown in the second chapter, these discursive narratives were often used by the administrations that followed 9/11 (in particular George Bush's administration) to justify actions such as the invasion of Iraq of the global War on Terror. Subsequently, the use of this particular rhetoric in such contexts is analyzed as elements of exceptionalism. Finally, the third hypothesis proposes that the Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism in terms of Manichean narratives. The Manichean, "us vs them" approach was used very often in the narratives linked to American exceptionalism that define the rest of the world as "others". This dichotomization allows for the U.S. to underline its exceptionality compared to this "other", and any reference to this separation is seen as an element of American exceptionalism. In superhero movies, this dichotomy between superheroes and villains shows how much the discourse of security is imbedded in the storylines, through the "hyper-moral" superheroes whose actions (in the form of violence or substantive justice) are justified by their status against these "others".

The originality of this research can be identified in four main points. First of all, there is no in-depth literature that analyzes the link between American exceptionalism and superheroes. In the literature analyzed for this thesis, the link between the two concepts was usually vague or very specific (to one specific movie or to a specific behavior). Therefore, by analyzing in details both American exceptionalism and superheroes and how it is relevant for

the case-study, this thesis stands apart. Secondly, there is very little literature between superheroes and international law. Superheroes are usually analyzed through their identities, their use of morality or their practice of substantive justice. Analyzing how superheroes and international law interact will therefore dive deeper into the subject. Thirdly, while there has been more and more literature on pop culture and superheroes after the Cold War in the United States, there is still very little in Europe. Being of both the Free University of Brussels and of the LUISS university in Rome, we hope to further a topic that we believe has had a lot of impact and is having more and more importance in our bathed-in-pop culture globalized society. Lastly, and probably more importantly, while there is quite a lot of literature about the first Avengers movie (*The Avengers, 2012*), there is little to none on the three other Avengers movies. The two last ones, in particular, were released in 2018 and 2019 which justifies the absence of literature, and this thesis tries to fill that void.

Overall, it was found that elements of American exceptionalism can indeed be found in the Avengers movies and, moreover, it is argued that the actions, behavior and discourses linked with American exceptionalism were a direct source of inspiration for the movies. This research started with the question: "How do the four Avengers movies reflect American exceptionalism?" and allowed us to draw some conclusions. To answer the research question, three chapters were dedicated to analyze every aspect of the problem, from the general context to specific dialogues and behaviors in each movie. These movies are, first of all, fully integrated into pop culture because of their success and all the consumption potential they create. Secondly, because of the huge investment that their production requires (*Avengers: Endgame* is the most expensive movie ever made and a large portion of the production costs are attributed to special effects and CGI), their visual aspect is crucial. By first analyzing the relationship between popular culture and international relations, the intent was, then, to show that pop culture is, in fact, relevant for academic analysis. And, more than relevant, we suggest through the analysis that pop culture is even necessary to understand certain aspects of international relations. By also analyzing the effects of visual representations, the objective was to demonstrate that visual representations do have an impact on audiences, whether it is through an "aesthetic of astonishment" or the messages these images carry. Comparatively to the current awareness of these topics in the existing literature, this general contextualization does not add any new knowledge, except for the fact that it is applied to movies that were never analyzed through this lens before.

The choice of constructivism as the theoretical approach, however, allowed to come up with several findings. First of all, it allowed to show that the construction of superheroes'

identities was deeply interconnected with the U.S.' behaviors, actions and discourses in terms of politics and identities on both an internal and external scale. Furthermore, we argue that the U.S. administrations' (in particular George Bush's) actions, behaviors and discourses actually influenced superhero production. Secondly and as an extension to the first point, we suggest that elements of American exceptionalism can be found in superhero production and are, again, a source of inspiration for superhero production. This was mostly developed in the second chapter, which analyzed the main themes that are superheroes and American exceptionalism. By mirroring the sections of the two concepts, it was shown that there are a lot of similarities that can be observed, in particular in terms of representations of 9/11, insecurity and Manicheanism. While the current literature on the subject generally focuses on one of these aspects, this thesis allows to show the logical interconnection that exists between each one of these concepts and how they link together superheroes and American exceptionalism.

The most original findings, however, can be found in the third chapter. Using constructivism to analyze each Avenger's identity (through their history as well as the ideas associated with it, their actions, their behaviors and their discourses), this allowed to understand their portrayal in every one of the movies analyzed. Furthermore, except for *The Avengers*, the three other movies had never been analyzed under the lens of American exceptionalism, which made their analysis completely original.

In the last chapter, then, the three hypotheses were tested. We have found that the first hypothesis, that suggests the presence of American exceptionalism in terms of representations of 9/11, can be found in the four Avengers movies, even if more importantly in the first two movies. We therefore conclude that in the first two movies, *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron,* the hypothesis is validated while in last two movies, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame,* the hypothesis is only partially validated. We have observed that the second hypothesis, suggesting the existence of American exceptionalism in terms of the insecurity rhetoric, can be seen in all movies except for *Avengers: Infinity War*. The movie serves, in the saga, as the setup for the last movie, which explains its particular structure. Consequently, the hypothesis is invalidated for this movie and validated for the three others. Finally, we determined that the third hypothesis, which suggests the presence of American exceptionalism in terms of Manicheanism, can be validated in all four movies. Except for *The Avengers*, the findings in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* are all original, and therefore contribute to the current knowledge and literature.

However, there are other aspects that could have been added to this research but who were seen as less relevant in the choice of the subject. These aspects are militarism, gender and

technology. These three topics have been tackled in the literature on superheroes and can be identified as the limits of this research; however, we made the decision to focus on representations of 9/11, insecurity and Manicheanism that we saw as more in line with the concept of American exceptionalism.