

AGENTS OF GLOBAL ARMAMENT: ANALYZING MASCULINITY  
AND MILITARISM IN “CAPTAIN AMERICA” AND  
THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

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2017

## **Dedication**

For mom. Thank you for everything you have done for me.

PREVIEW

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By

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## ABSTRACT

In the current zeitgeist, there has been a surge in the popularity of superhero movies. For many decades, Hollywood has been producing films that propagate ideologies of hyper-masculinity and militarism. This study suggests that it is possible to analyze the recent character “Captain America” as propaganda for militarism and hyper-masculinity. This study proposes to analyze the character in the films *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2011), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).

*Keywords: Captain America, Masculinity, Militarism, MCU, Superhero Movie*

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Worldwide, the fifth highest-grossing film of all-time, grossing \$1.5 billion to date, is *The Avengers* (2012), and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) rank in the top-20 highest-grossing (“Worldwide Grosses,” 2017). The high gross of *The Avengers* (2012), as well as the other Marvel films, clearly demonstrates that there is a large audience for blockbuster superhero films. These films are blockbusters, because they regenerate their production cost and more so, which is due to “an expanding global market” and the DVD returns (Schatz, 2009, p. 31). In fact, in order to guarantee a blockbuster, Hollywood has invisible “rules” that studios follow (p. 32). The MCU, and “Captain America,” fulfill many of these rules. For instance, some rules are to use comic book material to develop movie storylines, the protagonist should be male, and the protagonist should “inhabit a Manichean universe” (pp. 32-33). Hollywood re-uses material, in this case comic book stories and characters, that can be used to extend franchises, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (or, MCU).

The MCU is also considered to be one of the most successful franchises in history, with a total gross of more than \$4 billion (“Franchise Index,” 2016). Though this transmedia market is considered simplistic and mainly for children, it is expressing more than just superheroes that are the good guys who save the world from evil. Ideologies present in these films and other media are being reinforced. Furthermore, by reaching the child audience, the franchise is likely to guarantee an audience that will continue for future decades, which would cause the current zeitgeist to continue as well. It is due to the success of the MCU, these films and characters are

important for cultural analysis to determine the impact they have on the current zeitgeist, or whether they have an impact.

The phenomenon of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is not just its continuous expansion with the release of a new movie, but with the culture around the release of a new movie. On average, Disney/Marvel<sup>1</sup> releases a new movie each year, and they sometime release more than one film a year. In 2017, Disney/Marvel will release three movies:

1. *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, the sequel to *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), was released May 5<sup>th</sup>, and earned \$175 million in six days (Mendelson, 2017, para. 1);
2. *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, which is the third reboot of the Spider-Man character, is schedule for release July 7<sup>th</sup>;
3. and *Thor: Ragnarok*, the third solo film for the “Thor” character, is schedule for release November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Disney/Marvel releases films in almost every quarter of the year. While there was no film release in the beginning of 2017, Disney/Marvel did an official announcement for the first day of filming *Avengers: Infinity War*, which will be a two-part film and are scheduled for release May 2018 and May 2019. The MCU is constantly being expanded and Disney/Marvel, even without a film in theater, is always present in media and retail through the saturation of these markets with promotions of the franchise.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2009, The Walt Disney Company bought Marvel Entertainment for about \$4 billion. The only movie produced solely by Marvel was *Iron Man* (2008), which had a successful opening. The acquisition of Marvel by Disney, allowed for an increase of funding for more films.

For each movie that is planned for release, there is an obvious process that Disney/Marvel takes to “prepare” the audience. Before any of the movies begin filming, Disney/Marvel releases the cast information. For instance, Brie Larson was announced as “Captain Marvel” at Comic-Con 2016. When Marvel announced that “Captain Marvel” would be the first female superhero film, there was speculation about who it would be. In fandom<sup>2</sup>, there were many people that cast various actresses to play the character. Even though the film is not in production yet, fans and journalists continue to speculate about how “Captain Marvel” will be introduced into the MCU, since new characters have made cameos in other films before having their own, such as “Spider-Man” and “Black Panther.” By just announcing the movie was in pre-production, Disney/Marvel generated interest in the “Captain Marvel” future movie that fans will always want information about.

There is also a lot of interest by fans when the films begin production. For instance, *Avengers: Infinity War* began filming in January 2017. To include the fans of what is happening in the MCU, Disney/Marvel released a “first look” video in February 2017, which had interviews with some of the actors and the directors. By including the fans in the process of the filming, Marvel further increases interest in the film. The fans will want to know more about what is happening with the character and that direction the story is going; there is a lot of speculation. Furthermore, the actors in the film are also asked about it in interviews. For instance, Chris Evans, who plays “Captain America,” continues to be asked about his future with Marvel<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Fandom is the term used for the community that is created by fans.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Evans has a 6-movie contract with Disney/Marvel, which will be fulfilled with the release of *Avengers: Infinity War*.

Between Marvel and the actors, there is always new information about the MCU films that keeps fans interested in what is happening.

Disney/Marvel also reminds its fans that a movie will premier soon by releasing teaser trailers<sup>4</sup>, which average two minutes in duration and do not give a lot of information about the film. For instance, the first teaser trailer for *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) was released April 10, 2017, seven months before the film is scheduled to debut. By releasing a teaser trailer, Disney/Marvel has given fans enough information and content to speculate with. Within an hour of the release of teaser trailer, there were many posts about the teaser trailer on Tumblr<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the fans of the MCU create free promotional content for the film that is shared not only on Tumblr, but other social media sites as well.

The same day the teaser trailer for *Thor: Ragnarok* was released, the official poster was released as well. Taika Waititi, the director of *Thor 3*, and Chris Hemsworth, “Thor,” also posted a picture of the official poster on their social media platforms, as well as a link to the teaser. Eventually, the official poster for *Thor: Ragnarok* will be placed in theaters as well. The posters, whether outside or inside the theater, are placed there to constantly remind audiences when the movies will be released. Since *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* will be released soon, the posters for this film are already placed in theaters. Furthermore, depending on the marketing techniques, there are also card board cutouts to promote the films. Fans of the films can then interact with the card board cutouts by taking photos<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> A teaser trailer for a film is often shorter and has less information than a regular trailer.

<sup>5</sup> Tumblr is a social media website. The website is often used by people for fandom, where they post their own fan-made content and have discussions about fandom.

<sup>6</sup> When Atlas and DC Entertainment released *Suicide Squad* (2016), there was a card board cutout of the characters and people could take pictures beside them and pretend they were part of the movie as well.

While *Thor: Ragnarok* will be released November 2017, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* will be released May 2017. As the release for *Guardians* is much sooner, Disney/Marvel promotes the film a lot more. By April 2017, there are already two official trailers that have been released, the first trailer was released October 2016 and the second was released February 2017. There are also various television commercial spots for the film. The television promos also show similar content that is in the trailers, but they are shown more often on various channels.

While the release of trailers, posters, and television spots is always highly anticipated, so is the sale of tickets. For blockbuster films, fans often want to buy tickets in advance to the first showings on the day the film premier<sup>7</sup>. Disney/Marvel and theater companies release information about when tickets go on sale. These companies prepare the fans to buy the tickets, because they can sell quickly, and for blockbusters, they often sellout. Marvel, as well as the actors, posts ticket sale information on their social media platforms. If fans have accounts on any Disney/Marvel website, they also receive emails from them announcing the sale of tickets. Theater companies, such as Cinemark, and ticket companies, such as Fandango, also send out emails announcing the ticket sales to people with accounts. Therefore, fans of the MCU always know when the tickets go on sale and they can prepare in advance when they want to go watch the movie.

There is also a lot of promotion of the release of a MCU film on DVD/Blu-Ray. For instance, when *Doctor Strange* (2016) was set to be released on DVD/Blu-Ray February 2017, Disney/Marvel posted the release date on their social media platforms. The company also

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<sup>7</sup> While the official release date of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* is May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the first showings of the film will be on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The first showing of a film used to be at 00:00 am on the day of the official release. More recently, however, the first showings of new films have been after 6pm the day before.

released television promotion spots to announce the release of the film. Stores, such as Walmart, also had posters in the entrances to announce the film's release date. When *Doctor Strange* was released, there were stands with the various media platforms and cardboard posters by the registers, so shoppers would always be aware the film was on sale without having to go to the media entertainment department of the store.

As the release of a film in the MCU approaches, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, it will be promoted a lot more. The week any of the films is released, audiences are bombarded with new promotional content. For instance, the actors of the films will visit news and talk shows to be interviewed about the film. Every time an actor of the film is interviewed on television, the interviewer asks questions about the film, and then a new clip of the film is shown. At the end of every interview, the audience is told to go watch the film and is reminded when it film will be released.

Since a lot of the films the MCU releases are sequels, the previous films are also shown on television. By showing the previous films on television, Disney/Marvel can have old fans re-watch the previous films, and perhaps have new fans watch the previous films so they can watch the new one in theaters. Disney/Marvel also has their films of streaming platforms, such as Hulu and Netflix, so people can watch the previous movies before watching the new films in theater.

Furthermore, Disney/Marvel uses their show *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-present) as a platform to promote their new films. Marvel has used *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* to show new promotional sneak peaks. As part of the MCU, the audience of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* are likely to watch the films as well, and will benefit from being constant audience members. This will also entice non-regular viewers watch the show to catch the sneak peak, which will then increase the viewership rating of the show. Since *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is also part of the overall MCU,

storylines in the show have aligned with storylines of the films, especially *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). If audiences watch *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, then they need to watch the movie that is released while the show is on television to be able to solve any cliffhangers from the episode that is released before the film's premier, which then sets up the next film in the show.

Disney/Marvel is constantly promoting their brand by saturating the market with their logos and characters. Even if someone did not closely follow Disney/Marvel on social media, or pay attention to any commercials on television, they will still not avoid any MCU content. Disney/Marvel has contracts with food products to place their characters and the names of the movies on the packaging. For certain products, like fruit snacks or cereals, the images of Marvel characters tend remain on the packaging even if there is no MCU movie in theaters. On other products, such as chips or sodas, the images of characters are placed on the packaging to promote films. For instance, since *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* will be released in early May 2017, the images of the characters could be seen on packages of Doritos chips as early as April 2017.

Furthermore, every time there is a new movie in the MCU, Disney/Marvel releases new merchandise, such as toys and clothes, to promote the film. The new merchandise for each film is changed slightly to reflect the film. Even if kids, or adults, already have certain toys from previous films, the new toys promise new additions or changes in the characters that are going to be present in the new film, such as new weapons or uniform change. For people who are collectors, or kids who want the new toys, they are repurchasing action figures of the same characters from the previous films only to have the newer edition.

If there are new characters introduced in the films, they are also sold and promoted in toy markets. The new character action figures are often found in a package with other characters, so



even if a person has the other toys, they would need to repurchase them to get the new character. For instance, when *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) was released, there were two packages with all the action figures, one for “Team Iron Man” and the other “Team Captain America.” The action figures for the newer characters in the film were in each package. To own the new action figures of the newer characters, the whole set had to be bought even if a person already had action figures for either “Iron Man,” or “Captain America.”

The phenomenon of the Marvel Cinematic Universe has moved beyond just the film, it is in every aspect of people’s lives even if they are not fans of the franchise. Disney/Marvel inundates people with information regarding every movie that they are planning on releasing, new merchandise, and promotions through food products. There is a culture that is formed surrounding the MCU that allows for people to constantly be updated with what is happening with the franchise. The MCU, then, is a phenomenon that is influential in the cultural zeitgeist, and is reflected of and reinforces ideologies present in the cultural zeitgeist.

## **1.2 A Brief History of “Captain America”**

The MCU is an important phenomenon to critically analyze for ideologies that are being propagated to the audience. Furthermore, the character of “Captain America” is also important to analyze within the context of the MCU. “Captain America” originated as a comic book character, and was then adapted for the MCU. “Captain America” was created in 1941 by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon for Timely Comics, which later became Marvel Comics (Conroy, 2009, p. 62).

During World War II, the “Captain America” comics, as well as other comics were used as propaganda tools. The comics were used to promote involvement in WWII to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan. For instance, the first issue of the “Captain America” comics featured “Captain America” punching Hitler (p. 67). “Captain America” issues were also used to save

paper. In the issues, “Captain America” tells the readers that they are part of the war effort, they should join the organization “Sentinels of Liberty,” and need to save paper (pp. 64-65).

As “Captain America,” and other superheroes, were constantly fighting and defeating the enemy, the comics became “wish-fulfillment fodder” for soldiers that read them (p. 67). “Captain America” is a soldier that is fighting for America, and is then the symbol of what a soldier, or any a reader, should strive for to bring peace to the world. “Captain America” is also the embodiment of American nationalism (Dittmer, 2005, p. 627). Furthermore, “Captain America” quintessentially represents the “white savior.” The character is the “perfect” white male with “American” loyalty and beliefs, and only he can save the world. The narrative of “Captain America” as the “white savior” is also symbolic of the United States as the nation that “saves” everyone else.

Since “Captain America,” in the comics and the MCU, is created to fight for the American military. The character is so closely tied to an American organization, which then “establishes him as both a representative of the idealized American nation and as a defender of the American status quo” (p. 627). The character inherently symbolizes the United States and the ideological leanings of the United States. Through this character, American ideologies are reinforced and reflected in the cultural zeitgeist. Therefore, it is important to critically analyze how symbols of militarism and masculinity are reflected and reinforced by “Captain America” in the MCU.

### **1.3 Militarization in Film**

Importantly, these films, particularly the character “Captain America,” typically represent a Manichaeistic view, which is the concept that the “forces of light and goodness are destined to confront evildoers,” as well as jingoism, which is the “ease in which a majority of Americans can

be mobilized behind military venture” (Boggs & Pollard, 2016, pp. 17-18). These symbols are reinforced in every movie that is released that foregrounds “Captain America” as the only reason the world is saved from “evil.” These symbols that “Captain America” and the MCU represent are indicative of “[Americans that] act modern, cool, and sophisticated... but underneath, want a daddy, a king, a god, a hero...a champion who will carry that lance and that sword in to the field and fight for [them]” (Dowd, 1992, para. 5). Therefore, the MCU and “Captain America” symbolize these ideologies, which are also representative of and symbiotic with the zeitgeist in which they are released.

Though the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a more recent phenomenon, it is not the first time that comic superhero films have been released—Batman (1966) could be considered the first feature length superhero film. Yet, today, comic-based films are at the height of popularity (Hickey, 2014, para. 6). Likewise, the United States is currently involved in the War on Terror, which is considered to be a never-ending war. This has presented the perfect opportunity for Hollywood to produce films that reflect and serve the cultural zeitgeist. There is a war without a visible end, and if a superhero existed, then everyone would be protected and saved. Thus, films are used to make people believe that “super” soldiers need to exist outside of films to live in a “safe” world.

Propaganda has been used as a form of manipulation by dominant groups, in this case the military, since at least World War I. Some of the earliest forms of propaganda have been by cartoons (Conroy, 2009, p. 46). By using cartoons in newspapers, propagandists can reach a larger audience and reinforce ideologies. Within this large audience, there are people with lower education levels, who are more likely to be manipulated by propaganda (Aitken, 2013). Similarly, films can reach a large audience.

During World War II, the United States government used films as a propaganda tool. In fact, the Office of War Information, or OWI, hired Frank Capra, a film director, to produce propaganda films (Ellis & McLane, 2009, p. 132). The purpose of these films was to convince the population that the U.S. needed to get involved in WWII. Thus, since the 1940s, the U.S. government has had a vested interest in using film as a propaganda medium to reach a large audience.

For propaganda to work, there needs to be repetition. The ideological message needs to be continuously reinforced and sustained, especially during a time of war so that the population is always aware of the “enemy” (Regan, 1994, p. 46). The MCU is the perfect platform for propaganda and its reinforcement. As an extended universe, there are new films and television shows being released that are all connected. People are going to watch new material in the MCU to be up to date on how the story is unfolding. Furthermore, they are going to re-watch the movies and shows that have already been released.

Since Disney/Marvel continuously releases new movies, and the audience can re-watch movies, the MCU is the perfect platform for propaganda. The media and popular culture have been used for military propaganda for the U.S. government, because the government does not have an official propaganda machine (Boggs, 2012, p. 13). Thus, the MCU serves as the perfect platform for military propaganda, because it is constantly being reinforced. Furthermore, some scholars have stated that militarism promotes masculinity. Therefore, this study suggests that it is necessary to not only analyze symbols of militarism in film, but symbols of masculinity as well.

#### **1.4 Masculinity in the MCU**

Of course, people are conditioned to want a hero that saves the day. That is why the hero exists, to save everyone. Furthermore, superheroes should be able to go above and beyond—it is

implied in the name. By adding “super,” the hero should be able to defeat anything. There is something “more” to the hero. In order to have a “super” hero, the character is often given ultimate strength (e.g., “Steve Rogers,” or “Captain America”), or is a genius (e.g., “Tony Stark,” or “Iron Man”). It is no longer “regular” people that are saving the day, but rather people with enhanced capabilities.

Even when superheroes are parodied, such as in the program *The Big Bang Theory*, there is still a desire by “normal” people to be superheroes (Brown, 2016, p. 131). The main characters of this show, mostly male and considered to be “geeks,” have dressed up as their favorite superhero characters in various episodes (p. 132). As Brown states, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present), as a parody of geek culture, shows how superhero films impact fans (p. 132). Superheroes, then, are considered the ultimate form of human greatness, or in some cases alien greatness (e.g., Superman). Thus, the zeitgeist suggests that regardless of who you are, there is always a desire to be a superhero.

These films are telling the audience that the superhero form, for instance the physical strength, is the ultimate goal to achieving worthiness. Furthermore, because the MCU is a franchise, people are not limited to watching these characters save the day in films. Franchises are created by “...megafilms designed to sustain a product line of similar films and an ever-expanding array of related entertainment products...” (Schatz, 2009, p. 30). Therefore, audiences are not limited to these films to see these characters. These characters, Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, etc., are on food products, clothing, toys, etc.—they permeate many aspects of people’s daily lives, especially children’s.

Through transmedia, the audience continues to interact with the characters, their stories, and the ideologies after they watch the films. As long as these movies continue to yield a high

profit for production companies, they will continue to be released. Often, these films are seen as comic book adaptations that could be thought of as children's movies, specifically, movies for boys. In fact, Disney bought Marvel in order to secure a transmedia market targeted for boys, which they lacked as Disney's main target audience has mostly been girls because of "princesses" in their films (McLauchlin, 2015, para. 14). With the purchase of Marvel, Disney was able to expand their market to boys by providing them "superhero" toys. These "superhero" toys reinforce militarism, and even militarized masculinity, in boys.

Gender discourse has shown that masculinity is a social construct (Tong, 2014, p. 201). That is, the cultural zeitgeist determines what it means to be either a "man" or "woman." Furthermore, scholars have found that militarism promotes a militarized masculinity. David Morgan (1994) states that "of all the sites where masculinities are constructed, reproduced, and deployed, those associated with war and the military are some of the most direct" (p. 165). In the military, men are forced to conform to what the military believes to be the what "real" men are like. Thus, this study suggests that "Captain America" reinforces militarized masculinity, because the character was created by the military and is a soldier.

### **1.5 "Captain America," Militarism, & Masculinity**

Once again, it is important to know that militaristic themes are not just in films but also in comic books. In an analysis of the Captain America comic books, Jason Dittmer (2005) states that the character embodies the "American identity by relating to nationalism and current political affairs" (p. 627). Although Dittmer is analyzing the Captain in the comic book universe, this conclusion could clearly apply to the films as well. Thus, this study suggests that the analysis of militarism in the Captain America comic books and stories is important, because these stories

are now being made into several films (e.g., *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and others).

These symbols are reinforced in every movie that is released that foregrounds “Captain America” as the only reason the world is saved from “evil.” These symbols that “Captain America” and the MCU represent are indicative of “[Americans that] act modern, cool, and sophisticated... but underneath, want a daddy, a king, a god, a hero...a champion who will carry that lance and that sword in to the field and fight for [them]” (Dowd, 1992, para. 5). Therefore, the MCU and “Captain America” symbolize these ideologies, which are also representative of and symbiotic with the zeitgeist in which they are released.

Furthermore, Captain America is “a representative of national identity, one must not ignore the display of his physical body as a marker of his heroic manhood” (Barbour, 2015, p. 277). The national identity that Captain America is representing is the belief that “heroic manhood” is achieved through hypermasculinity. Barbour (2015) states that “the transformation of Rogers into Captain America enacts that fantasy of instantaneous metamorphosis from weakling to super hero” (p. 279). Captain America represents the ultimate wish-fulfilling fantasy. He will be the weakling ever again—he is forever the superman.

## **1.6 Rationale**

Though “Captain America” and the MCU is fiction, the ideologies represented in the films could be representative of the cultural zeitgeist. These films, because they are seen as fantasy, are perfect for propagating militarism and masculinity as ideologies—especially since there is a ready-made audience. It is also this ready-made audience that may not necessarily notice the ideologies present in the films. Since members of the audience may have been fans of the comics first, they were already predisposed to the militaristic and masculine themes in these

films. Furthermore, since the films in franchise are all connected through storylines, there is a guaranteed the audience, because they most likely to continue to watch the films in order to know how the stories continue in each film. This, then, reinforces militaristic and masculine ideologies are reinforced. Thus, the current zeitgeist continues, because the audience does not question, or is not aware, of the ideologies being reinforced in these films.

Therefore, this study suggests that the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a transmedia phenomenon that is worthy of scholarly attention and analysis. The popularity of the MCU suggests that this a cultural, ideological phenomenon that can affect many people, not only in the United States, but worldwide. Most films that are analyzed for their militaristic themes are more likely to be about the U.S. military and wars. Within scholarly research, however, there is a gap in analyzing comic book films and militarism. This may be because they are seen as simplistic children's movies, and only about "good versus evil." This research project, however, will analyze how and to what extent the MCU and "Captain America" is used as a propaganda tool for hyper-masculinity and militarism.