

7-2014

Avenging women: an analysis of postfeminist female representation in the cinematic Marvel's Avengers series

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AVENGING WOMEN

An Analysis of Postfeminist Female Representation in
the Cinematic Marvel's Avengers Series

A Thesis
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

June 2014

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ABSTRACT

The cinematic Marvel Avengers series centers on larger than life male figures and leaves little space for fully developed female characters, relying instead on female tropes, stereotypes, and patriarchal constructions that present uncritical and monolithic representations of women. This thesis examines female characters in the Marvel Avengers series and uses them to exemplify and probe the woeful lack of meaningful representation of women in film. Widespread social contexts of sexism and postfeminism construct female representations that appear to empower but actually disempower women, and is subconsciously received. This series reinforces sexism and false postfeminist ideology through a combination of (1) power dynamics in which gender roles maintain and naturalize power divisions; (2) visuals in which the cinematic male gaze privileges the objectified female image; (3) narratives in which stereotypes, tropes, and binaries create monolithic representations of women that subconsciously inform female gender roles and sexuality; and (4) language constructions in which females are linguistically disempowered and essentialized. Reasons for such underwhelming representations of women, such as the lack of female presence in creation, production, and distribution of film historically and currently, and inherent problems within the superhero genre's film adaptation are also discussed.

**AVENGING WOMEN:
An Analysis of Postfeminist Female Representations
in the Cinematic Marvel Avengers Series**

By Mary DeMarchi

June 9th, 2014

Thesis Committee Chair: Dr. Barbara Speicher; Communication Studies

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The Bechdel test, created by Alison Bechdel in 1985 through her comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, measures if there is a relevant female presence in a film (Bechdel, 1986). The test is very simple: there must be two women with names that discuss with each other something other than a man. A film that passes this test, however, is hardly an indication of women in a film but merely the lowest possible requirements to see if women (not merely one woman) are given agency in a film. Sadly, but not surprisingly, many Hollywood films fail to meet this bare-minimum criteria of female representation. According to bechdeltest.com, a database of over four thousand films, only 53% of all films in 2012 passed, with 11% of films failing to have a named female character and 12% of films failing to have more than one female character. Of the ten films nominated for the 2012 Best Picture Oscar, only three films passed marginally merely because they featured women-centered casts and leads (Sarkeesian, 2013). The following year is even worse, with fewer than half of films released in the United States failing to meet the Bechdel Test in 2013.

The subversive Bechdel test highlights the problem of female representation in film and media. Contemporary mass media representations of women are still lacking in cinematic imagery despite beliefs to the contrary (Kuhn, 2004). While scholars and feminists since the 1960s have drawn attention to the issue of inadequate female representation in the media, both in terms of their number and the stereotyped roles they are relegated to, the realities of women's lives continue to be dismissed or ignored. Cinematic imagery is particularly worth studying as it contains multiple sensory applications that are difficult to separate. Unlike literature, music, art, or other media, cinematic imagery simultaneously presents visual, audio, and narrative aspects whose overall impact has a much greater force than any one element by itself. This is why it is

important to analyze these mass media representations of women since they are materialized and reinforced in the real world.

One of the most successful film franchises in recent memory (and an abject failure of the Bechdel test) has been the Marvel Avengers series (digitalspy, 2012). The series centers on larger than life male figures and leaves little space for fully developed female characters, relying instead on female tropes, stereotypes, and patriarchal constructions that present uncritical and monolithic representations of women. This thesis will examine female characters in the Marvel Avengers series and use them to exemplify and probe the woeful lack of meaningful representation of women in film. Female representations in this superhero series reinforce dominant patriarchal ideology through media's (Marvel's) interpretation of postfeminism, which constrains the narrative and female arcs (a continuous progression or line of development), conflates sexual empowerment and agency with hyperfemininity/hypersexuality, and internalizes the male gaze and objectification. First, this essay will set up the widespread social context of sexism and postfeminism that constructs female representations that appear to empower but actually disempower women, and the history and current role of women in the film industry and the lack of female presence in creation, production, and distribution. I will then demonstrate how the Marvel Avengers series reinforces sexism and false postfeminist ideology through a combination of (1) power dynamics in which gender roles maintain and naturalize power divisions; (2) visuals in which the cinematic male gaze privileges the objectified female image; (3) narratives in which stereotypes, tropes, and binaries create monolithic representations of women that subconsciously inform female gender roles and sexuality; and (4) language constructions in which females are linguistically disempowered and essentialized. Lastly, I will

discuss reasons for such underwhelming representations of women and address inherent problems within the superhero genre and film industry before my concluding remarks.

This thesis will look exclusively at main female representations in the Marvel Avengers series: Pepper Potts from the Iron Man plotlines (Tony Stark/ Iron Man), Natasha Romanoff/ Black Widow from the Avengers plotline, Jane Foster from the Thor plotline (Thor), Betty Ross from the Hulk plotline (Bruce Banner/ Hulk), and Peggy Carter from the Captain America plotline (Steve Rodgers/ Captain America). This thesis analyzes the way in which language, cinematic visuals, and common narrative themes and tropes are used to construct postfeminist representations of women in this superhero series. Although the superheroes are factors in these female representations, my focus will not include masculine representations; nor will it include a critical analysis of other oppressive factors (such as race or class). Such factors will only be mentioned as they pertain to the female gender and (presumed heterosexual) sexuality issues of these five female characters. The films examined here will include *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, *Iron Man 3*, *Thor*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *The Avengers*.

The Marvel Avengers series is an expansive 15 film series that intersects several Marvel Comic superheroes – Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, and Thor – into the ultimate superhero fighting team who protect the earth: the Avengers.¹ Each superhero has their own trilogy² and origin but certain elements from each individual story overlap, such as crossover characters. The

¹ Please refer to the Appendix: Marvel Avengers Film Details for a brief overview of each film.

² Despite the fact that Marvel has released a statement saying that they have planned additional films in the upcoming fourteen years, only three film titles have been released. Given that some of the actors are signed on for multiple films that extend past their trilogy, it is unsure whether or not the Hulk will receive his own trilogy or remain only in the Avengers plotline with *The Incredible Hulk* as a (pre)spin-off. Joss Whedon claims that it is very difficult to create a film that fans enjoy but he does not entirely rule out a trilogy for the Hulk (digitalspy.com, 2012).

crossover elements from each superhero trilogy then become crucial narrative information for the Avengers trilogy, interweaving the Marvel universe into one grand storyline and forcing the superheroes to come together to share information and defend the world as a super-team. For example, hints, tools, and characters in the first film of the Avengers trilogy, *The Avengers* (2012), are interwoven throughout the plotlines of the other superhero trilogies in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: the First Avenger* (2011). *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2* introduce the secret government agency S.H.I.E.L.D. that creates the Avengers Initiative, its purpose, and important members (such as Director Nick Fury and agents Phil Coulson and Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow). The villain in *Thor*, Loki (superhero Thor's brother) crosses over as the villain in *The Avengers*. The weapon of mass destruction used in *Captain America* is the same weapon used in this first Avengers trilogy installment and is a relic of Thor's world. Hence, although one could essentially understand *The Avengers* without watching the previous films, the other plotlines add a backstory and complete the whole picture from the sum of its parts, creating an interlaced nuanced universe for the franchise.

I specifically chose this film series because of its popularity and role in creating major changes in the film industry. A rising trend is the superhero genre that replaces the fantasy film trends of the early 2000s. Successful film franchises such as Warner Brothers/ DC Comics Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight trilogy, Fox's and Sony's X-Men/ X-Men Origins/ X-Men First Class series, and, of course, the Marvel Avengers series have been released at breakneck speed over the past decade. In March 2014, Marvel Studios executive and Avenger series producer Kevin Feige released a statement that slates upcoming Marvel films to 2028, averaging three releases a year (Ryan, 2014). DC Comics released a similar statement for its Justice

Leagues series to compete with the two Marvel Super Franchises (The Avengers and Guardians of the Galaxy). Hence, the commitment to bolstering this genre is strong, with record breaking box office numbers capturing their popularity with audiences (Ryan, 2014). As of March 28th, 2014, one week before the second installment of the Captain America trilogy (and ninth installment of the series), the Avengers series has grossed over 5.65 trillion U.S. Dollars, with *The Avengers* – only released May 2012 – accounting for \$1.5 trillion (imbd.com). *The Avengers* and *Iron Man 3* have the third and fifth places of the highest grossing films of all time, beating powerhouses like the Harry Potter series, the Star Wars series, the Lord of the Ring Series, the Indiana Jones series, the James Bond series, *Gone with the Wind*, and *The Godfather I and II* (imdb.com). Each year since its inception in 2008, a Marvel Avengers film has been in the top 10 grossing films of that year, with two films (*Iron Man 3* and *Thor: the Dark World*) making the list in 2013, and *The Avengers* and *Iron Man 3* placing first for 2012 and 2013 (imdb.com).

In addition to the genre's popularity, the Marvel Avengers series portends a major change in the film industry that capitalizes on weaving many plotlines and trilogies together into a larger series. Previously, the trilogy was held as the ideal formula for a drawn-out film series, with films becoming a box office gamble after the third release (Harrison, 2013).³ However, Marvel Studios developed a bold plan to incorporate many of their plotlines into a gigantic film series universe, rather like the world of printed comics, based on the breakout success of *Iron Man* in 2008 (Harrison, 2013).⁴ Using this formula, which leaves options for additions of new characters and popular sub-characters to start their own spinoffs, can ideally create market demand for all

³ Although some blockbuster films have been continually created in connection to the original films, like the *Jaws* or *Rocky* series, three remained the overwhelming number in film sets (Harrison, 2013).

⁴ The popularity of Sam Raimi's Spider-Man trilogy (2002-2007) and X-Men trilogy (2000-2006) also proved that the expensive and expansive Superhero film series could be financially sustainable (Harrison, 2013).

films without necessarily ending the series. Essentially, Marvel Studios has revolutionized the way that films are being created, ensuring a serialization in the film industry in which films, like comics, have a sustainable shelf life as long as they stay popular. The successful model has started a race for superhero franchises – including the long-standing rivalry between the two comic juggernauts Marvel and DC Comics – that is realistically sustainable.

On a personal note, this topic is important to me as I grew up craving female characters in film with whom I could identify. Like Alison Bechdel, I found many of female representations in film and television to be one-dimensional and at times disrespectful, and it frightened me that these films represented what I could expect and what was expected of me as an adult woman. This is why I strongly gravitated towards *Star Wars* and the character Princess Leia, an active female role model who is not defined by her man – she resists being in love rather than allowing it to consume her – and who focuses on the political movements and resistance. However, to date, there is an unfortunate lack of responsible female representations that illustrate diverse contexts and facets of being a woman, beyond those images, narratives, and contexts which revolve around men or fashion. I chose this topic to research as I wanted to better understand why these female representations persist decades later in the hopes that we expand pigeonholed female representations – especially those representations of weak-willed women passively waiting for a man to change their lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Female representations in the Marvel Avengers series maintain dominant patriarchal ideology through sexism, which supports dualistic traditional gender roles, and media's interpretation of postfeminism, which posits hyperfemininity/ hypersexuality, individualization, and internalization of the male gaze and objectification as sexual empowerment and agency. As this analysis will use specific tools in cinema, feminism, media, communication, psychology, and sociolinguistics to examine these issues, I will first explore relevant literature regarding the two main areas that create the problematic monolithic female representations in the Marvel Avengers series: sexism and objectification, and postfeminism. I will then give a brief overview of relevant issues regarding these female representations: background in women in the film industry, superhero genre as it applies this analysis, and subconscious reception of cinematic imagery.

Sexism and Objectification

Sexism refers to the behaviors and attitudes that support the belief that one gender, usually male, is superior to others. Sexist practices are widely prevalent in every society and stem from patriarchy, men's structural control over political, legal, economic, and religious institutions (Baldwin, 1984; Herzog & Oreg, 2008). Sexism is inherently different from other forms of prejudice because there is interdependency between the oppressor and the oppressed. According to *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (2010), "Anthropological research suggests that patriarchy is pervasive among the majority of human societies, such that women have been systematically discriminated against, oppressed, and marginalized by men throughout history"

(1234). Sexism maintains patriarchal social structures and reinforces prescribed gender roles. Therefore sexism is socialized and conditions people to accept patriarchy. People internalize sexism by learning gender roles and norms, and are conditioned to act correspondingly (West & Zimmerman, 1987). For the purposes of this study, I will only focus on sexism against women.

Social and cultural norms encourage sexism among men and women. Herzog and Oreg (2008) testify to this notion:

A classic illustration of [sexism] is the endorsement of modern-day chivalry in interactions between women and men... This tradition is founded in historical representations of women as inferior to men. In these circumstances, people may find it difficult to distinguish between kindness, tradition, and benevolent sexism (47).

In this respect, women often take part in their own oppression by internalizing sexism as a protective mechanism for their good girl status and their valued contributions to society. Women ‘police’ other women (monitor, control, shame, etc.) based on these values and evaluations, upholding the oppression of the good girl stereotype (Cohen, 1997). The opposite gender roles, such as a neglectful mother or a sexually available woman, would be unacceptable and negatively labeled in comparison to other good girls (Cohen, 1997; Herzog & Oreg, 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1987).⁵ Essentially, women are taught to not deviate from traditional gender roles as wives and caretakers and will be rewarded with idolization by men for their sexual purity and availability. Women have now internalized sexist oppression as their own desires and agency, invoking peer-pressure, victim-shaming, and slut-bashing, and reifying the virgin/whore and mother/bitch binaries.⁶

⁵ For example, working mothers, single mothers, and mothers on welfare are considered to be less motherly – and therefore less of a woman – than married non-working mothers. This is a belief often perpetuated among women based on their socialized self-view of childcare as their primary gender role (Cohen, 1997).

⁶ This is the basis for postfeminism, discussed in the next section.

Noticeably, much of sexism is grounded in expressions of sexuality and objectification. Gervais et.al. (2011) describes objectification as when one's sexual body parts are removed from their identity, represent their identity or represent an object of the body for judgment. The objectifying gaze is the most prevalent form of objectification for women. Objectification theory posits that images of sexualized (and often artificial) female beauty cause women to internalize the 'observers' perspective' about themselves that constructs the desire to be 'beautiful' as a personal choice rather than an imposed ideal and forces women to focus on attaining an idealized image (Gervais et.al., 2011; Halliwell et. al., 2011). Objectification increases women's body issues, monitoring/ policing, and internalized awareness and behavior that women's appearances are valued while other factors (character, intelligence, talents, etc.) are devalued or dismissed (Gervais et.al., 2011; Halliwell et. al., 2011). Objectification is also considered a main factor in disempowering women. This causes a vicious cycle in which women are objectified, causing them to underachieve and internalize objectification, which then confirms the notion that women's appearances are more important than their character, behavior, talents, achievements, and so on (Gervais et.al., 2011). Thus the cycle starts over and fortifies the status quo, which is further reinforced when women interact with objectifiers (Gervais et. al., 2011).

Since the media bombards women with depictions of themselves as passive objects and bodies for male desire while also portraying women as sexually liberated, empowered, and autonomous, this internalized oppression rationalizes that women enjoy presenting themselves as sex objects (Gill, 2007, 2009; Halliwell et. al., 2011). This leads to acceptance of self-sexualizing behaviors among women. Contemporary representations of women internalize a "self-policing narcissistic gaze" (Halliwell et. al., 2011, 35) in which the sexualized images of women are crucial in self-objectification. As these new representations of so-called sexually empowered

women are still based in appearance and conformity to beauty ideals and norms, they are even more damaging than the traditional passive objectified representations. It creates a paradox in which women's sexual appearance is still the focus in new sexually liberating and empowering representations yet still solicits the male gaze and is limited by normalized beauty standards.

Postfeminism in Pop-Culture

The media is particularly adept in supporting a world view that endorses sexism as normal and even empowering for women. Postfeminist pop-culture, or what will be referred to as simply *postfeminism* for the purposes of this analysis, is often conflated with third-wave feminism and academic post-feminism⁷ which center on women's right to sexuality, agency, and empowerment. According to Tasker and Negra (2005; 2006), third-wave feminism arose from the disenchantment many women had with women's rights movement (second-wave feminism) in the 1950's-1970's. Although second-wave feminism gained many political and cultural rights, like reproductive and sexual rights, many women believed this movement focused mainly on the needs of middle-class white women, marginalizing others like women of color and the gay community. They also believed that second-wave feminism rejected many expressions of sexuality as patriarchal and oppressive rather than empowering and agentive. As a result, third-wave feminism evolved to include women of color and the gay community, and championed sexual empowerment and agency (among other issues). Academic post-feminism centers on feminism in a 'post' world: post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial, queer theory, etc.

⁷ When referencing academic and political post-feminism, 'post-feminism' will be marked by a hyphen. I will use 'postfeminism' without a hyphen to refer to pop-culture postfeminism/media's interpretation of postfeminism.

(Holmlund, 2005). Although third-wave feminism and academic post-feminism purposefully broke apart from the classist, hegemonic, white middle-class heterosexual second-wave feminism, they still appreciate second-wave feminism's accomplishments and remain a political, social, and cultural movement (Holmlund, 2005; Lazar, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2005, 2006).

Postfeminism, to the contrary, posits that since women are now more visible, empowered, and free, feminism is irrelevant, unnecessary, obsolete and/or politically regressive in modern society, actively disavowing or repudiating feminism as an outdated ideology. (Gill, 2007; Holmlund, 2005; Lazar, 2009; Levine, 2008; Tasker & Negra, 2005; 2006). Consequently, it undervalues second-wave feminism's achievements and inaccurately characterizes second-wave feminism in narrow terms, such as the 'man-hating' and 'anti-mother' stereotypes (Levine, 2008). Instead, it embraces a surface level of third-wave feminism's sexual agency and empowerment that is conveniently uncritical of oppressions and devoid of political motivations, embracing traditional femininity which serves patriarchy, such as the sexual objectification of women's bodies. Individualism (rather than the collective self or community) is promoted through sexual agency, self-determination, and autonomy, further reducing the need for the person to be political or to identify with a collective feminist group (Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008). Women now can 'make' their 'own' choices as individuals without collective awareness, collective political activity, or critique of structural inequalities (Levine, 2008). Simply, women have increased reliance on policing their *individual* selves, further reducing the need for the collective (political) self.⁸

⁸ This creates a postfeminist hegemony centering on privileged women, marginalizing other women's experiences. Moreover, not only is sexism co-opted through the internalizing of the male gaze, objectification, and traditional femininity, but also through the self-surveillance of neoliberalism as agency is constructed as rational, calculating, and self-regulating (Gill, 2009).

Gill (2009) calls this paradox ‘postfeminist sensibilities’ that places “feminist ideas alongside a fierce repudiation of feminism” (346), creating a uniquely postfeminist argument: postfeminist discourse allows women a superficial agency of choice – where a woman is expected to choose traditional feminine values and ‘power femininity.’ Traditional femininity is revered, preaching female empowerment and self-determination through reifying and naturalizing traditional female values. This repackages self-awareness of objectification as female empowerment, confusing sexual agency and empowerment with objectified, infantilized, and/or hypersexualized femininity (Andrews, 2008; Gill, 2009; Holmlund, 2005; Lazar, 2009; Levine, 2008; Martin, 2007; Tasker & Negra, 2005; 2006). Yet since this ‘sexploitation’ *appeals* to women rather than challenges the feminine stereotypes, it becomes a convoluted defense of the male desire all under the guise of female agency (Andrews, 2007). The construction of masculinity is once again privileged and dominant, and women have, ironically, internalized what was previously presented as men’s desires in (pre-)feminism (the male gaze) as *women’s* desires in postfeminism. Thus, postfeminism dresses up traditional femininity with misguided sexual agency, creating an individualized sexualized woman without a critical focus or the notion of ‘the person is political’ that feminism is founded upon.

Pop-culture globalizes sexism through its interpretation of postfeminism (Gill, 2007; Holmlund, 2005; Lazar, 2009; 2006; Levine, 2008; Tasker & Negra, 2005). Postfeminism, which overlooks the historical, cultural, and technological circumstances concerning the production, distribution, and reception of films (Holmlund 2005), privileges patriarchy as a dominant ideology. Consequently, since cinema reflects dominant ideology, “*every film is political,*” (Comolli & Narboni, 1969, 688, emphasis original) whether it is intentional or not (Comolli & Narboni, 1969; Richardson & Queen, 2012). Therefore, as the Bechdel test highlights, the basis

of cinema centers on a patriarchal unconscious that constructs its representations of gender and sexuality through patriarchal coded language and images (Mulvey, 1975).⁹ This creates interest in patriarchally constructed postfeminism as consumerism that solidifies the postfeminist double-entanglement of false female empowerment and sexual agency via many successful big budget films (Holmlund, 2005; Levine, 2008; Martin, 2007).¹⁰ The late 1990's and 2000's 'Girl Power' launched interest in consumerist postfeminism that pairs infantilized femininity with independence and self-determination, cementing the ignorance of feminism (Levine, 2008). These premises promote sexism through traditional femininity and internalized objectification as sexuality. Such films render critical feminism invisible because they are predicated on 'exceptional women' narratives, the history of the woman on screen, women as marketable products in pop-culture, and the star power of the actresses (Dyer, 1979; Levine, 2008; Mizejewski, 2006).¹¹ Plots now emphasize romance, sexiness, fashion, and femininity, complete with women-can-have-it-all endings, Marilyn Monroe-esque debutantes in the latest fashion with powerful boyfriends, and spotlights for overexposure – and without critical or political focus (Holmlund, 2005; Levine, 2008; Martin, 2007). Thus, film's postfeminist identity signifies the benchmark of womanhood and femininity: a confident woman who does not worry about political commitment but rather individual concerns like romance and feminine consumerist preferences like fashion and beauty products (Andrews 2008; Gill, 2009; Holmlund, 2005; Levine, 2008; Martin 2007; Mizejewski, 2006; Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008).

⁹ Although the construction of cinema reflects dominant ideology, this does not necessarily mean that spectators will accept it.

¹⁰ Some examples include *Down With Love*, *Out of Sight*, and both *Charlie's Angels* films. This marginalizes race and sexualities by favoring white, straight, privileged women and cements the ignorance of feminism (Levine, 2008).

¹¹ Small independent films created for a niche-market are able to branch out from the mass-produced postfeminist protagonist (Holmlund, 2005).

Women in the Film Industry

Pop-culture and the media industry tend to categorize women into niche-markets, despite recognizing how important women's spending power can be for the industry. Films, including women-centered films or films targeted towards and about women, are created, produced, and marketed by men that frequently placate to male audience 'voyeurs,' leaving hegemonic white male assumptions intact (Kuhn, 2004; Maule, 2010; Tasker & Negra, 2005). Representation of white hegemonic males set the (assumed and privileged but invisible) hegemonic standard upon which most cinema is based. Men predominantly call the shots in cinema – as studio executives, directors, writers, crew leaders, etc. – translating into male-dominated and male-centered cinema that focuses primarily on men, their stories, and their points of view, and rarely incorporate women as major characters or as crucial to the plot (Sarkeesian, 2012; Tasker & Negra, 2005). Women's issues, socioeconomic issues, geography, and agency are individualized and repackaged as commodities for profit, and can result in creating a false recognition for women of what true agency may be when presented with consumerist, postfeminist or sexist ideologies and elements.

As the Bechdel test demonstrates, these films include while they simultaneously exclude: women are given more lead roles, but issues women face are being reduced in representation (Tasker & Negra, 2005).¹² Media produced by women has increased recently but feminist restructuring of the social and material production and exhibition remain insignificant in terms of achievements (White, 2006). The film and television industry has incorporated more women yet decreased intellectual feminist criticism and political and cultural framing, women's issues, and

¹² Women of color have been able to take on a wider variety of genres and are increasing their leading role potential. Yet these roles and genres dismiss relevant social themes such as race and class that are prevalent among the communities that these women of color represent (Holmlund, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2005).

the visibility of diverse women (Maule, 2010; Kuhn, 2004; Tasker & Negra, 2005; White, 2006). As of 2006, women represent about 20-25% percent of the directors in independent films and only 7% of directors in top grossing domestic films (in 250 films, fewer than 20 directors were women), reminding women that the issues of basic equity and representation are a continuous uphill battle (White, 2006).

Superhero Genre and Its Film Adaptation

Thomas Schatz (1981) claims that a genre narrative “animates and ritualistically resolves basic cultural conflicts and contradictions” (24). What makes the superhero narrative unique is the primary genre conventions of mission, identity, and power (Coogan, 2006). For the superhero genre, one of the largest culture conflicts is that of self vs. society, and aims to resolve the problem of “binding young adolescent males to the larger community” (Coogan, 2006, 24). A superhero’s mission must be prosocial, noble, and selfless and easily fit within the context of current social values (ergo making the villain selfish and antisocial who represents the antithesis of social values). In these narratives, young men learn to apply their abilities – usually some form of strength – for the benefit of the greater good, utilizing the juxtaposition of the dual identities where one is relatable to young male readers (the alter ego) and another is a role model (the superhero) (Coogan, 2006). This accounts for the male-centric attitudes and viewpoints and patriarchal elements present in most superhero plotlines.

The superhero genre is almost exclusively created by and managed by men and has a history in promoting sexism and patriarchy, reducing even their strong female superheroines to stereotypical female roles (Robbins, 1996). According to Coogan (2006), what could be

considered the first superhero (the late depression era) is a woman named Olga Mesmer, the Girl with the X-Ray Eyes. Released by the publisher who later published *Superman*, Olga's story is very much like Superman: she was born with super powers that include super strength and x-ray vision, her mother is an alien, she must save two races of people, etc. However, Olga's story was cleverly repackaged the following year as Superman, who is almost unanimously considered the first superhero and launches the superhero genre, and Olga disappeared.¹³ Wonder Women, widely accepted as the first female superhero, was at first created in 1941 to empower women to leave the private sphere in order to work in factories while the men were fighting in World War 2 (Robbins, 1996; Stuller, 2010). Wonder Woman's creator, psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston (under pseudonym Charles Moulton), believed in gender equality and originally created this superhero to be more powerful than men (Knight, 2010). At first Wonder Woman does not need a man, rather it is her love interest that needs her, producing some of the most feminist narratives in comic history (Stuller, 2010). However, once the war ended and women were expected to return to the kitchen, Wonder Woman became increasingly more helpless and docile, with her adventures becoming those of romance and promoting female consumerism (Robbins, 1996; Stuller, 2010). It was not until the 1970s, with the increase of women's rights awareness and the popularity of the television show, *Wonder Woman*, did she regain some of her superhero glory, but more on screen than in print and never to the same feminist extent as originally created (Robbins, 1996; Stuller, 2010).

¹³ Coogan (2008) claims that Olga may not be considered a superhero because she lacked the specific identity element of dual identities marked by a chevron, which helped give birth to Superman's image and create the gatekeeping element to the superhero genre that rendered Olga unnecessary. Thus her plotline was terminated and Olga is rarely acknowledged for her contributions to the superhero genre.

The film superhero genre is mostly based on adaptation of comics. Because the adaptation has become its own profitable sub-industry within the film industry, it is an industrial system in which multiple players change and influence an adaptation, from the authors, producers, filmmakers, and screenwriters, to the lawyers, managers, and even schedulers and reviewers (Murray, 2012). This gives the creator little say in the resulting adaptation, who are further legally constrained from intervening, giving much of the power to the filmmakers and studios (Lake, 2012; Murray, 2012). Murray (2012) calls the adaptation industry “a vast, transnational, constantly mutating and frequently internally conflictual socioeconomic system with tremendous influence in shaping the contours of contemporary culture” (123) that pushes Anglophone ideals into other markets. Murray (2012) states, “Cultural politics in fact play out every bit as powerfully in the circumstances of [adaptations’] creation, their routes of circulation, and their various modes of consumption. If anything, cultural assumptions and norms may be more potent in these contexts...” (130). Therefore, not only do the filmmakers have liberties in creating the film adaptation but they also consciously produce specific ideologies (like patriarchy) for international consumption, making an adaptation something loosely related to the work that suits the needs of the production more than the creators, its fans, or the audience (Murray, 2012).

Comics present a unique type of adaptation that further complicates the adaptation process and favors whatever ideologies and representations filmmakers want to present. According to Zeller-Jacques (2012), while the printed comics live in suspense and have more varied outcomes due to their serialization, the film adaptations will always remain the same due to film’s need of narrative resolution. Since comics may present hundreds of issues of a character, filmmakers literally have thousands of different options to choose from in creating a

story. Although this gives the filmmakers more directions to go, it also results in massive simplification of the narrative, characters, themes, and so on, causing filmmakers to make these simplified elements (such as female representations) as “commercial as possible” (144). As the filmmakers also face the problem of making old stories modern, they are pressured to repackage the adaptation (while still promoting dominant ideology) to suit a mass film audience who is unfamiliar with the comics rather than the niche comic book audience who is often regarded as ‘never being satisfied.’ According to Scott Bukatman (2011), “the superhero film generally feels like an impoverished version of superhero comics” (119) that leaves the viewer wanting more, creating a hollowness that does not provide the psychological weight of the comics or of other film genres (like the Western) and fetishizing trauma in order to compensate for such hollowness.

Subconscious Reception of Cinematic Imagery

Part of what aids in the internalization of (patriarchal) oppression and objectification that may happen with postfeminism is the way that ideologies are presented in cinematic imagery. Gorham (1999) explores the role of stereotypes in the media and their ideological effects that result from repeated stereotypical representations. According to Gorham, as stereotypes represent the biases of social interactions, social reality – predominantly unverified information which shapes people’s beliefs that is assumed because others assume the same information – is cultural. Myths authenticate these cultural differences because they distort the original meaning of signs, purifying and naturalizing a new ambiguous meaning, signifying their meaning as social reality, and resulting in stereotypes. The human memory cognitively naturalizes stereotypes; each myth

is categorized in the brain and contains a trace. As more traces pile up, more meaning is inferred from them (or the same meaning is reinforced). Retrieval then becomes more instantaneous and recognition becomes subconscious – referred to as *automaticity* – which results in classical conditioning. As stated by Gorham, the media therefore creates and perpetuates stereotypes by ‘re-presenting’ reality in certain contexts and meanings, encouraging representations that create dominant and subordinate stereotypes by representing or favoring certain groups’ ideologies such as patriarchy. As every myth and stereotype presented in media is processed automatically, these media stereotypes thus fortify particular signifiers that then strengthen the ability of signs to carry certain myths. Individuals, of course, can reject these myths consciously, but they cannot unsee or unhear it, hence with each iteration the myth has been reinforced the brain’s pathway and the damage is essentially done.

Repeating stereotyping aids the construction of schema-based knowledge, historical and cultural norm-driven subsystems that supply clues. Schema-based knowledge allows the audience to make inferences, and calls on the audience to access the dominant ideology (Bordwell, 1992). Given that the male gaze represents dominant patriarchal ideology and sexism disguised as postfeminism, and constructs mainstream cinema, this can influence spectator cognition and comprehension (Bordwell, 1992; Mulvey, 1975, 1981; Richardson & Queen, 2012). David Bordwell (1992) explores how audiences make sense of and process films, arguing that audiences understand films by using previous knowledge to categorize information and provide meaning in order to make inferences. This causes spectators to process the information into fundamental features (gists) to make complex inferential elaborations throughout and after viewing. The audience, for example, can gather who will be a superhero’s love interest by subtle cues or usual narrative set-ups without expressly being given information. Automaticity helps

schema building so a spectator can not only understand gists and make guesses, but can continue to subconsciously and consciously process information based on subconscious reception of myths and stereotypes. Schema-based knowledge may be subconscious or conscious, but it uses the subconscious reception of automaticity and its accumulated myths to authenticate dominant ideology in order to elaborate and make sense of what is being presented, further naturalizing that ideology to a likely unaware spectator. Thus learning is constructed by channels already subconsciously established.

ANALYSIS

This analysis investigates the way in which language, cinematic visuals, and common narrative themes and tropes are used to construct postfeminist representations of women in the cinematic Marvel Avengers series. The main female representations examined are Pepper Potts from the Iron Man plotlines (Tony Stark/ Iron Man), Natasha Romanoff/ Black Widow from the Avengers plotline, Jane Foster from the Thor plotline (Thor), Betty Ross from the Hulk plotline (Bruce Banner/ Hulk), and Peggy Carter from the Captain America plotline (Steve Rodgers/ Captain America).¹⁴

Power Dynamics: Traditional Gender Roles Repackaged as Postfeminism

The division of power between male and female characters becomes one of the major patriarchal tropes reinforced in the Marvel Avengers series. Gender divides and traditional gender roles are maintained through gender divisions between masculinity/ femininity, active male/ passive female, hypersexuality/ hyperfemininity, and structural power/ dyadic (relationship or intimate) power. Logically, as masculinities become a recurring theme among superheroes, it is not just the male character who defines masculinity but also the postfeminist femininity in contrast to him as the Other. The Marvel Avengers' love interests are all hyperfeminized, heightening the superheroes' masculinities. These women perform femininity and never challenge traditional masculinity, particularly regarding physical dominance, reinforcing the men's brute strength and tough-guy demeanors and the women's caretaking, supportive roles.

¹⁴ Please refer to Appendix: Marvel Avengers Film Details for a brief overview of each film.

By preserving the women as inferior and physically dependent and/ or weaker, the women necessitate the men's masculinities by constructing their femininity in opposition to the men's masculinities, a common cinematic trope. Mulvey (1975, 1981) argues that dominant patriarchal ideology exemplified in film creates gender divides by the sexual differences that determine active/ passive gender roles and sexualities: the active male/ passive female paradigm. Unmistakably, the superheroes and their alter egos represent active males: they drive the plots and have developed arcs. The women, conversely, still remain passive overall; things happen *to* them rather than their making things happen. Although these women are not passive females in the traditional sense – they have careers, independence, resources, and even tough attitudes – the power divisions are still present and these women continue to represent passive female roles. The male characters change dramatically throughout the films, but the female characters remain the same even though they appear increasingly more active within the series. These women have little to no backstory, do not drive the plots, and their story arcs exist solely to accentuate the superheroes' arcs. They function only to serve as love interests, objects that inspire love or fear of loss for the superheroes, or sources of (primarily emotional) support to the superheroes.

Frequently, these women are not only passive but become objects and trophies, particularly Pepper Potts (Iron Man plotline) and Betty Ross (Hulk plotline), who eventually become literal objects for men to claim as possessions. Both Betty's father and the *Iron Man 3* villain Aldrich Killian employ Betty and Pepper (respectively) as bait to lure their superhero boyfriends (Bruce Banner/Hulk and Tony Stark/Iron Man respectively) into traps. In the first Thor film, Jane Foster (Thor plotline) also serves no function besides acting as Thor's love interest, except to witness Thor's capture and serve as an example of the similarities humans have to godlike Asgardians. Jane's role expands very little in the second Thor film, in which she

serves as an object that creates tension between Thor and his father/king and that universes. At every instance where she could help, particularly in regards to her specific scientific expertise that could be utilized, she passes out and/ or needs rescuing. Jane furthermore becomes literally a vessel for the Aether, a weapon of great destruction that must inhabit an individual in order to be used. This happens as a result of Jane's infantilized femininity where she is not only clumsy enough to stumble upon the weapon and touch it, but did so while obsessively searching for Thor even though there was no indication he was there. Her infantilized femininity literally makes her an object for the purpose of Thor's arc. Jane is a woman messing around in a predominantly male dominated field whose scientific curiosity/ bumbling almost destroys two worlds. Hence, the active male/ passive female paradigm devalues or invalidates female viewpoints and gender/ sexual identity.

In contrast to Pepper, Betty, and Jane, Peggy Carter (Captain America plotline) and Natasha Romanoff (Avengers plotline) seem to be much more active female characters. They both are tough, driven military women who take on more pro-active roles than the other women and each actively defies a command to aid a superhero. However, again, despite a few empowering characteristics, these women remain passive in the story lines. Both women are regulated by military commanders, serve to aid the superheroes' arcs, and provide support. Peggy, who has virtually no backstory, supplies pep talks, weapons, and transportation to Steve, while Natasha provides unimaginative 'back-up' to other agents and the superheroes.

Moreover, women are barely present in these films. To date, the only female 'hero' represented on screen is Black Widow (Natasha), whose power is dwarfed by the godlike males around her. Very few female extras play intelligent roles (like S.H.I.E.L.D. agents or scientists) yet many act as mere eye candy. Outside of six secondary female characters in eight films – half

of which serve specific purposes that only a woman can provide, such as being a mother – all featured non-essential women serve to either sexually tempt these superheroes or to die, providing a binary function of women's non-essential presence in film. The one female scientist in S.H.I.E.L.D. and the one female military officer are killed by the villains after delivering their only line (*The Avengers*, 2012; *The Incredible Hulk*, 2008). The only other female military personnel in *Captain America* throws herself at Steve against strict military protocol (something even Peggy would not do) (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011). Asgardians are supposed to be warriors, regardless of their sex, yet there are no women fighting when the Dark Elves invade Asgard (*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013). In fact, as plot devices, only two Asgardian women are ever seen fighting: Thor's expected mate and his mother, who in the first film could barely lift her husband's sword to defend herself. With the exception of Jane's intern (Darcy Lewis) in *Thor*, who functions more as comic relief, the supporting female characters are just that, noticeably not much different from the main female characters. This lack of female presence suggests the unimportance of women in institutions and their irrelevance in public spheres.

Part of what constructs these women to be passive females in this paradigm is the false postfeminist viewpoint that hyperfemininity and hypersexuality (without a critical focus) are empowering. Postfeminism continues to hold females back even though male characters are transforming. Hypersexuality in this series, as best exemplified by the sexualized Natasha/ Black Widow, is constructed under blatant sexism. Natasha is frequently debased by the other characters for using her sexuality, particularly Tony and Bruce, who view Natasha's sexuality as manipulative and distrust her. Although Black Widow uses sexuality as a disarming technique, Natasha herself does not use her sexuality and is not sexual. Yet it is Natasha who assumes this

punishment of debasement, and not her Avenger identity Black Widow. When Natasha attempts to retrieve Bruce/ Hulk for the Avengers Initiative in *The Avengers* (2012), Bruce is already suspicious of Natasha when he meets her because she is very charming and beautiful.

Understanding her to be a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Bruce believes Natasha is sexually manipulating him even though she is expressly being non-sexual and friendly. In a later scene, when Natasha tells him that the villain Loki is manipulating him, Bruce replies, “and you’ve been doing what exactly?” (*The Avengers*, 2012), implying that he still does not trust her and despite the fact that she has become a friend and ally to Bruce when most agents avoid him out of fear of his alter ego, the Hulk. Bruce’s distrust causes the Hulk to single her out a few moments later as his first victim due to his alter ego, Bruce’s, distrust of Natasha.

This treatment towards Natasha becomes ironic; Black Widow’s hypersexuality is indeed a useful espionage tactic, yet Natasha is expressly non sexual, no-nonsense, and professional – something that Bruce should be able to understand since he desperately does not want to be judged by the Hulk’s actions. Although almost everyone is afraid of the Hulk, they accept Bruce and value his scientific prowess. They respect him for his ability. However, Natasha and the Black Widow receive the same treatment, regardless of the difference between Natasha and her alter ego. Here, Bruce can figuratively transform into the Hulk, allowing his alter ego, Bruce, to still remain himself while Natasha is always considered to be Black Widow, even when she is out of character and simply herself.

In opposition, the superheroes’ love interests display postfeminist hyperfemininity, the contrary pole to hypersexuality and Natasha. As sexism construes hypersexuality as threatening, romanticized sexism and postfeminism construe hyperfemininity as non-threatening and desirable. Femininity is inherently submissive because caretaking, nurturing, and supportive

roles are valued and sexuality is purified, causing men to romanticize these traits rather than debase them as is done with hypersexuality. Whereas hypersexuality's aggression, control, and agency imply a challenge to men's power, hyperfemininity does not by being in direct contrast to hypersexuality. The love interests are extremely poised, delicate women who are always in dresses and praised for their reserved sexuality and caretaking roles. They serve to remind the superhero of his connection to humanity and often as contrast to the superheroes' hypermasculine qualities. A vast majority of superhero plotlines revolve around saving weaker humans, in which the reader or viewer becomes emotionally invested (Cawelti, 2013) and the love interests best serve this romanticized sexist interest.

It is no coincidence that Betty is the most hyperfeminized of the women considering she is the love interest for the most brutish and hypermasculine superhero, the Hulk. Although the Hulk badly injured her, which caused his alter ego Bruce to leave without a word for many years, and she is in a new healthy, happy, and successful relationship, Betty instantly slides into the supportive girlfriend role the moment she thinks she sees Bruce (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008). Betty's caretaking role surpasses any of the other love interests as she provides emotional comfort and support to both Bruce and the Hulk, chooses Bruce/ Hulk over her father, and puts herself in mortal danger because emotionally she cannot be separated from him. Betty even pawns her dead mother's locket – the only thing left of her – to show her unwavering devotion to him.

Similarly, although Jane at first appears the least feminized of the group as she is nerdy, dresses functionally rather than for appearance (pants, snow boots, and t-shirts), and seems more interested in her research than love in *Thor* (2011), her sexuality is infantilized as she is very clumsy and awkward – but in a quirky way. This is desirable to Thor, who on Earth is equally

clumsy due to his superhuman strength that causes a lot of accidental destruction. If Jane exuded sexual confidence rather than gracelessness like Thor, this would be threatening to hypermasculine Thor, who not only would be intellectually inferior but would constantly be making mistakes while his love is not. However, in the sequel, *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), Jane is revamped as more feminine, downplaying her infantilized sexuality and clumsy nature and up-playing a girly image and behavior now that she is faced with an implied competition with Thor's confident, sexualized, and physically competent expected Asgardian mate. Not only does she dress as hyperfeminized (floral patterns, gowns, pastels, etc.), she has spent two years wallowing in her mother's basement over Thor rather than continuing the research that was immensely important to her in the previous film. Although she needed no expressed protection in the first film, Jane needs constant protection and help in the sequel, causing Thor to become the ultimate romantic protector.

Peggy, however, deserves special attention. She becomes representative of the desirable postfeminist mix of sexuality and femininity. Peggy is physically attractive and confident, but she does not flaunt her body or sexuality in intimidating ways. Her outfits, even her military outfits, are tailored to her contours and feminized. She appears classy rather than sexualized, with perfect posture and lipstick. Peggy is also strong in a way that is non-threatening to her male co-workers. Although she is somewhat of an authority figure,¹⁵ Peggy's power appears to lie in her nurturing abilities to Steve/ Captain America; her strength and capabilities are used to support him rather than stand on her own. Peggy may act tough, but the narrative makes her a

¹⁵ Peggy is a British Intelligence agent, so it is unclear where her rank stands. She is a consultant for the U.S. Army's Super Soldier project that created Captain America. Peggy appears to be a superior officer to the Army recruits but subordinate to the ranking military officials, yet is still privy to strategy meetings. Her authority is ambiguous.

sympathetic character for Steve. Peggy's resolute belief in his ability and devotion to his work makes her the ultimate romanticized sexist and postfeminist representation. Even the seemingly cold Natasha also becomes caretaker and cheerleader for Clint Barton/ Hawkeye, a fellow Avenger, supplying him with much needed support and motivation to carry onwards (*The Avengers*, 2012).

Costuming also reinforces (postfeminist) gender divides and body issues. Whereas the superhero's costumes emphasize their relative powers and strength, the women's clothing emphasize their entire bodies for objectification. When Thor and his fellow Asgardian gods arrive at the Ice World Jotunheim in *Thor* (2011), the men are fully clothed yet the goddess Sif remains in a tube top chest plate and skirt, inappropriate for the cold weather and for battle. Pepper is never without her stiletto heels and a tight pencil skirt (which makes it difficult for her to escape danger and primes her for rescuing). Peggy's military outfits are tailor-made in order to accentuate her chest, tiny waist, and ample buttocks, unlike the men's shapeless uniforms. Natasha, agent Maria Hill, and every female S.H.I.E.L.D. agent wear required spandex unitards or tight skirts as their uniform, somehow essential for filing paper work, driving vehicles, and reading radar screens. Natasha's Black Widow costume is meant to showcase her body and cleavage rather than her skills, which in reality would make it painful or impossible to even run without proper breast support, negating the purpose of having a costume. Even Natasha's street clothes are tight fitted. The superhero costumes also act to showcase the masculine body, but unlike the costuming of the females, these costumes also serve a functional purpose that aid in

their superhero abilities. Yet every article of clothing the women wear reiterates patriarchal reinforcement of body objectification in the series.¹⁶

Postfeminism also maintains power divides between women based woman-on-woman sexism, including women policing other women, which Pepper constantly does. Because Tony famously and callously uses women as sexual objects, Pepper often gets jealous over Tony's disposable women. Pepper instantly dislikes and distrusts Natasha as Tony's new personal assistant (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). When Tony first meets Natasha, Pepper insists that Natasha cannot be his personal assistant and is visibly upset when Tony hires Natasha against her wishes, calling her a "potential law suit" (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). This prompts her to accuse Natasha of sexually manipulating Tony a few scenes later, despite the fact that Natasha does nothing differently than Pepper did as his personal assistant (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). Tony ignores Pepper and her bossy behavior when he becomes extremely intoxicated and reckless at his birthday party, causing her to yell at Natasha, "Oh don't you 'Miss Potts' me! I'm onto you! Ever since you came here, things have been [bad¹⁷]" (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). When Tony refuses to cooperate with her, Pepper assumes Natasha is responsible for his behavior, even though Natasha suggested to him earlier to reschedule the "ill-timed" party and attempts to control Tony's damage (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). However, upon realizing that Natasha is no longer a sexual threat after their exchange, Pepper becomes friends with her and they team up against Tony, now bonded together by their sheer annoyance with him. Pepper's actions are founded within postfeminism's individualization and loss of the collective self, which posits that women are inherit competitors for men's attention,

¹⁶ This does not end with onscreen representations; even the actresses are objectified. In a U.K. press interview for *The Avengers*, the male cast members were asked thought-provoking questions regarding their character development while Scarlett Johansson (who plays Natasha) only received questions related to her diet and costume (digitalspy, 2012).

¹⁷ "Bad" is implied. Pepper is cut-off when an inebriated Iron Man throws Iron Patriot (an ally) through the wall.

often causing women to blame each other rather than the responsible party (Tony). Any woman deviating from the role of the traditional woman is punished. Supposedly sexually permissive women, like the hypersexualized Natasha, receive cold treatment from Pepper in order to police their sexuality.

In addition to the power dynamics between femininities and masculinities, the men maintain the structural power while the women maintain the intimate or relationship power and provide support, giving the women a false postfeminist sense of empowerment. Despite their authoritative statuses in their careers, the women exercise little authority and remain subordinate to men; the women serve men. Every woman needs approval from a male superior, including Peggy and Natasha, the most independent and capable women of the group. Natasha (Black Widow) is merely an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. – not a superhero – utilized to retrieve superheroes and villains by sexually manipulating them. Her backstory is insinuated but never developed like those of the men. Although she has developed combat skills, she acts more like an administrator and follower than a lead character. Even the men, like Director Fury and Agent Coulson, that give Natasha some responsibility or control, which they label as ‘orders,’ barely interact with her and never give Natasha more responsibility outside running tasks (‘assignments’). Natasha *helps* save the day rather than save the day herself like her Avenger male counterparts. It appears that she is merely a sexy vehicle used to introduce administrative or supportive elements. This maintains power divisions and undermines the capability of female leadership.

The women’s so-called power revolves around their love and relationships with the heroes, which naturally makes them effective targets for villains. They provide the stability and the acceptance the superheroes need. Tony is a self-proclaimed “genius billionaire playboy philanthropist” (*The Avengers*, 2012) who obsesses over the love of Pepper to the point of near

self-destruction. While Tony/ Iron Man is saving the world from threats or perfecting a new iron suit, Pepper is still managing Tony's life and work, in addition to her normal CEO responsibilities. She is simultaneously lover and mother to the wunderkind man-child. Additionally, Thor's mother, the queen, refuses to leave her husband's side when he falls ill even though the kingdom is in desperate need of stable leadership (*Thor*, 2011). This causes Asgard to fall under the rule of the charismatic villain Loki who nearly destroys half the galaxy in less than a day. These behaviors suggest that women's power and control come from the relationship to the male protagonist – as the Other – rather than structural power or through their own means (as a critical feminist representation would include). This also implies that women use structural power irresponsibly and thus need a male to save the day.

In many ways, Natasha may seem empowered. She appears to be very capable in a male dominated and physical career. Natasha, however, due to her hypersexuality has no love interest, leaving her void of any structural or dyadic power. Her close relationship to Clint Barton/ Hawkeye is purposefully treated more like a sibling relationship rather than potential love interest. The only man that does appear to outwardly respect her is Steve, but this respect appears to be a chivalrous form of sexism from an era where women more commonly were romanticized as caretakers (wives and mothers) and expressly desexualized.¹⁸

Much of this pseudo empowerment stems from postfeminism's clever repackaging of traditional gender roles that allows token gestures of empowerment without any critical context. Pepper Potts is an excellent example of this postfeminist repackaging and pseudo-empowerment. During the Iron Man plotline, Pepper goes from being Tony's personal assistant to CEO of Stark

¹⁸ Steve Rodgers/ Captain America lived during the first half of the 20th century, but was frozen for almost 70 years when a mission during World War II caused him to crash his plane into the arctic (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011).

Industries, effectively taking Tony's place. Although this may seem empowering, Pepper only receives the position – without the approval of the board – because Tony is romantically/sexually interested in her and can essentially install a puppet regime. Pepper is a poor choice to be a CEO as her experience is in assistance and caretaking of one self-indulgent man, not leadership and management of a multinational multi-industrial organization (something on which the news channels dwell in *Iron Man 2*). In *The Avengers* (2012), even though she is the CEO, Pepper is not on the leases of the buildings they own and build while Tony, who is no longer a part of Stark Industries' decision making, is. Pepper asks Tony for permission to be on the lease of the next building (which he ignores). In *Iron Man 3* (2013), Pepper rejects Killian's Extremis Project because Tony "would not approve," even though Killian expressly came to her, *not* Tony, as the new CEO to make this decision. In fact, the narrative only superficially showcases her job when it is relevant to Tony's arc, and always with his input. This establishes that even as CEO, Pepper's priority is still her relationship and loyalty to Tony, requiring his approval in all facets of her life.

Pepper's pseudo empowerment even becomes a plot device in *Iron Man 3* (2013) where Pepper is briefly transformed into a superhero (Extremis). Killian kidnaps Pepper and injects her with the Extremis serum, which creates the ability for the body to self-heal through extreme heat and the power to control heat, in order to hurt Tony. During Tony and Killian's battle, in which Tony employs forty-two robotic Iron Man suits to help defeat a handful of Extremis Soldiers, Pepper appears to fall to her death. However, when the Extremis superpower appears to be too powerful and Tony cannot defeat Killian, Pepper, now imbued with the Extremis superpower (heat/ fire and super strength) that saved her life, suddenly arrives and quickly kills Killian. Tony then destroys all his Iron Man suits, which Pepper calls "distractions" throughout the film, and

later uses his intellectual genius to surgically remove Pepper's superpowers. This may seem like an active female/ passive male narrative as it appears that Tony cannot defeat the Extremis villain Killian with his Iron Man suits while the Extremis Pepper can and does. However, Tony appears threatened by Pepper's newfound superhero status rather than relieved or delighted to see her alive. Rather than thank her, Tony downgrades Pepper's new superpowers that only seconds earlier saved his life and insists that he can "fix" her and make her "normal" again, reclaiming his superior status and causing Pepper to self-denigrate by referring to herself as a "hot mess." Through this exchange, Tony removes Pepper's figurative (and eventually literal) power, thus turning her back into his ordinary girlfriend while he remains a superhero.

Tony's treatment towards Pepper's briefly held superpowers becomes especially hypocritical because their superpowers are virtually the same (indestructibility, superhuman strength, and heat blasts). Moreover, Tony/ Iron Man, whose powers resulted from an accident, views his unstable powers – which are slowly killing him – as a gift, empowering him. He even explains to Bruce/ Hulk, whose unstable superpowers also resulted from an accident, that their superpowers, although unstable, are gifts meant to protect them (*The Avengers*, 2012). Pepper, however, who also did not choose to gain superpowers, is infused with a superpower that has proven stable once adapted which she was able to control in order to defeat Killian, but is not allowed to be empowered by this "gift" and, according to Tony, must view it as negative. Tony's disempowerment of her new superpowers evokes Pepper's worry. When Pepper looks to him for guidance, asking questions about whether or not she will be alright, Tony nonchalantly reassures her powers can be removed rather than reassuring her that she can control her powers as he did for Bruce.

Not only does their relationship fortify power divisions within relationships, but also double standards and gender roles. This scenario reinforces the assumption that superhero powers are meant for men and that women are too weak to control superhero powers. Therefore, now disempowered, Pepper attempts to regain her dyadic power by wanting Tony to destroy all forty-two of his Iron Man suits since they are “distractions” from their relationship, even though the suits are extremely useful and likely still needed in the future. This endorses the belief that women are threatened by outside activities that distract from the relationship as the central focus as well as reinforcing women’s dyadic power through nagging and harping. Tony destroys the suits, but as an egotistical power-play to assert his power over Pepper, whose Extremis powers can easily destroy his Iron Man suits (as demonstrated with Killian). Tony could not defeat Killian but Pepper could, thus making her more powerful than Tony. This causes Tony to destroy his suits in order to effectively trump Pepper’s power. Tony can easily make other suits, but Pepper will never be able to create superpowers again. This act does not solve Tony’s “distraction” problem in their relationship since Tony will now have to create more suits. Hence, destroying the suits becomes a symbolic gesture for Pepper’s pseudo dyadic power and the return of the status quo, a sort of consolation prize for giving up her superpower/ potential structural power. By trivializing the suits (and by extension Pepper’s new abilities) and privileging his superior intelligence which will “fix” her, Pepper ultimately lets Tony take her powers away in favor of his love and comfort, thus reverting their relationship back to ‘normal:’ Pepper as the caretaker and Tony as the protector.¹⁹

¹⁹ The theme of *Iron Man 3* (2013) is Tony’s dependence on his Iron Man suits (his superhero armor), making his arc about realizing that *he* is Iron Man regardless of the suits, and Pepper’s purpose to the story as an object that he cannot live without. Pepper literally becomes a trophy throughout the entire film that the villain and Tony fight over in spite of this pseudo-empowerment twist ending. Since Tony realizes that he is the inventor and the brains behind Iron Man while the suits are merely his strongman tools, the suits’ destruction is narratively unnecessary since Tony is able to divorce his contributions and talents from the Iron Man suit. However, Tony can live without the suits, but

The Marvel Avengers series demonstrates how postfeminism, present not just within the films but also in the superhero genre and film industry that creates the films, aids in possible subconscious reception of patriarchy. When the superhero genre presents women as narrative victims, plot devices, and supporting characters, gender divisive myths and schema-based knowledge informs plausible expectations of the Marvel Avengers' women. Postfeminism still promotes patriarchy and becomes problematic when nicely packaged in the media, as with, for example, an active male superhero and a passive female love interest or the division of structural and dyadic power. If every time a woman is praised for her support, nurturing, and femininity, or her structural power is stripped from her, it adds to the myth and schema building that women should remain subordinate. Since postfeminism constructs every representation of women's power in this series, these female characters exemplify this dominant cinematic ideology.

Disappointingly, the women in the series continue to lack an institutional and political focus as their roles function in a vacuum as if a job title is merely enough to represent the reality women face every day. This is not to say that these women must face sexual or gendered discrimination in order to be considered critical representations, but placing these women in contexts that display other facets of women outside of caretaker, lover, and supporter/nurturer is necessary for a more multi-dimensional and critical portrayal. Reflecting women as if they only pertain to men, as in this series, is not representative and limits females to only one timeworn dimension, reducing them to mere love interests in spite of their postfeminist gains. Dyadic power is no substitute for critical focus. The series reinforces masculinities and femininities as well as power divides, under the guise of the hyperfeminized and hypersexualized independent

not without Pepper's caretaking, adding yet another layer to Tony's decision to destroy the suits and returning the status quo, further binding Pepper to him and reinforcing women's value as caretaking and their power as dyadic.

(career) women. Women in these films are simply bodies to be desired and game pieces for the male characters on screen.

The Male Gaze: Constructing Female Objectification as Sexy and Desirable

Unsurprisingly, it is difficult to discuss postfeminism's internalization of the female body's objectification without discussing the male gaze and its influence in cinematic female representations. The Marvel Avengers series create monolithic postfeminist representations of women that subconsciously inform female gender roles and sexuality as the male gaze is a main focus of the construction of these female representation.

According to John Berger (1972), who studied images of female nudity in art and how it affects modern advertising, images are the most powerful communicator in existence. They capture moments in time and possess them forever. Images can illustrate what words cannot fully describe. As the social meaning of art denotes status, the nude image of women in art has primed men to look at women (the lookers), while women become objects of the male gaze (the looked-at). Most nude female images are painted with the assumption of the male presence as the viewer and/ or within the painting itself by other subjects. Her pose and gaze is meant to entice the male viewer, and her image mystifies and intrigues as viewers can only interpret the image. The woman's pleasure-evoking image assures men of their manhood when looking, making the painting about the male viewer and the woman as the object. This causes a woman to unconsciously behave or perform knowing that she is constantly being viewed, not only by men but also by other women and by herself. The advent of the camera multiplies this behavior as it manipulates the way society looks at art today and has the ability to change the entire meaning of

an image by placing it with certain texts. This is particularly true when selling a product, which uses glamour, sex, and envy to sell ideologies like paths to happiness through materialism.

Films themselves are products, but they sell ideologies along with images. Laura Mulvey (1975), in studying passive female representations in classical Hollywood, applies psychoanalysis and feminism to film and asserts that the patriarchal unconscious manifests in female representations in Hollywood as solely serving the male gaze. Men's subconscious desires are projected onto the screen through surrogacy in an active male character (as in the active male/ passive female paradigm previously discussed)²⁰ and scopophilia (the pleasure derived from looking) for the female body through the male gaze. The spectator acquires pleasure from voyeurism and narcissism that shapes the ways in which mainstream cinema exploits the sexual imagery of men and women. The (assumed heterosexual male) spectator's lust for scopophilic voyeurism is satiated by the passive female image on screen. The active male functions as a surrogate for the male spectator; he cannot only see himself as behaving like the male protagonist/ hero but also in acting out his fantasies with the passive female. Consequently, the woman becomes the passive receiver – 'the bearer' – not the creator, of meaning in a patriarchal order, and thus becomes the object of the male gaze (the looked-at) and the passive agent in cinematic representation.²¹

Berger and Mulvey assume a prototypical, heterosexual/ normative male spectator, that only a male can 'interpret' the image of the female, and that females identify with the heteronormative male's interpretation (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975, 1981). Mulvey (1975, 1981)

²⁰ See Power Dynamics.

²¹ Although critics pan Mulvey for making sweeping generalizations, assuming a hegemonic heteronormative male viewpoint, and leaving no other interpretations, because the eyes of the camera and characters in this series strongly portray a heteronormative male gaze diegetically, it seems appropriate to apply her critique here as this series reinforces objectified sexualized and passive female representations recurrent in cinema.

argues that dominant patriarchal ideology is epitomized as a system of visual representations of sexual differences that determines active/ passive gender roles and sexualities and looking/ looked-at divide, assuming a heteronormative male spectator because it is how the cinematic apparatus of Hollywood perceives the ideal spectator. The eye of the camera and the eye of the character create a necessary distance in order for the spectator to believe the reality presented on screen. The spectator consciously ignores the camera and himself (as watching from the outside) so that he can engage in scopophilic and narcissistic voyeurism (Mulvey, 1975). This privileges the spectator with invisibility – to look without being looked at or seen – as well as the point of view of the active male protagonist. Mulvey (1981) also argues that women must alternate between masculine and feminine identifications. Mary-Ann Doane agrees and notes that while men can allow distance to fetishize and derive pleasure, women cannot since they *are* the image/ the object of desire being represented, causing them to over-identify with the female representation or to assume the ‘masculine position’ and narcissistically internalize the male gaze as their own desire (cited in Stacey, 1987). This claims that the female spectator would either identify with the superhero, internalizing his gaze as powerful, or to over-identify as his (often passive female) love interest. Doane views cinematic constructed femininity as a masquerade of the disparity between the female spectator and the dominant patriarchal structures of cinematic ‘looking’ (Stacey, 1987).

The woman can become an icon, displayed as the object of sexual desire that is transformed into exhibitionism through the eye of the camera, and her visual presence tends to halt the story line to dwell on her image (Mulvey, 1975). Nowhere is this more recognizable than when the camera frames Natasha, the only main female character to be hypersexualized. Although the camera occasionally frames all the women as silhouettes that emphasize their

bodies, it consistently frames Natasha with regard to her body. Rarely are there shots (such as facial shots) of Natasha without her body in frame. Her body position always features her chest and the camera habitually lingers on her body parts, particularly her waist and buttocks. Shots often show Natasha's breasts and buttocks in frame, usually in a profile, even when she is not the focus or narratively relevant. When Russian mobsters interrogate Natasha in *The Avengers* (2012), even though the focus is the mobsters and their lines, the camera frames them through Natasha's spread legs, awarding a focal point to her body in competition with the narrative. This happens again when Natasha interrogates Loki. The camera frames the villain to the side of her waist-line in order to keep her buttocks in a large portion of the frame. Natasha's function is to support the mobsters' and Loki's narratives (not to give crucial information), yet her body occupies most of the screen while the men, who actually give the crucial narrative details, become small visuals in comparison. Furthermore, Natasha's costuming is skin-tight, with Black Widow's costume as a cleavage-bearing, body hugging latex suit, evoking the image of being nude. This aids in the desire to keep her body on screen. Her body thus becomes the focal point rather than the narrative elements.

The eye of the camera romantically gazes at Betty and Jane, the most traditionally romanticized characters. Here the camera loves rather than lusts as it does with Natasha. Unlike Natasha, Betty and Jane's faces become the camera's focal point that privileges their beauty over their bodies, causing the eye of the camera to hyperfeminize or romanticize them. Practically every frame of Betty is with a soft romantic touch. Habitually filming her angelic face, constantly fraught with love, devotion and concern, serves to remind the audience and Bruce/Hulk what he is really fighting for – his love. Even when Betty is hurt, she passes out in a beautiful pose (similar to a model's pose) with minimal visible damage to her beautiful face, in

contrast to the bloody and dead men around her. Betty is also the only woman to cry in the series – and cries often – but in a delicate, beautiful manner in which single tears roll down her cheek. Likewise, Jane, the least voluptuous of the women is framed as tiny and delicate, with her angelic face and doe-eyes always highlighted. Jane additionally faints several times in the second Thor film, but, like Betty, never with any damage to her body or face. Even though she is known to be dangerously clumsy, Jane never face-plants, but ever so gracefully floats to the floor in a beautiful pose and frame. It is no coincidence that even the love interests' injuries are beautiful, with slight cuts that complement their face structures and do not detract from their beauty. As Berger claims that images are more powerful than words, the eye of the camera therefore helps frame females through the male gaze, showcasing their bodies or beauty for voyeuristic scopophilia, highlighting the importance given to the male gaze, and prioritizing the female image over her narrative development.

Peggy, the most voluptuous of all female representations, becomes a mixture of hypersexualized and hyperfeminized framing: the camera constantly frames her in a way that accentuates her massive but modestly displayed chest, bright red lips, and traditional beauty. However, as the narrative romanticizes rather than sexualizes Peggy, the camera often frames her with a more romantic eye than a sexual eye as with Natasha. Peggy, unlike Natasha, is sometimes framed without her chest showing, privileging her face and beauty over her chest and body. The camera keeps visual focus on Peggy's body only when she is narratively crucial (such as speaking lines) and gives her a balanced amount of romanticized facial and beauty shots to counterweigh her naturally curvaceous body. Although she often remains background eye candy, the camera does not frame shots through or around her body as is done with Natasha.

The male gaze represented in the eye of the camera helps reflect the male gaze in the eye of the male character. In this sense, the woman can represent an ‘alien’ presence due to her image as an icon (Mulvey, 1975). Because the image of woman mystifies men, and the assumed heteronormative male spectator interprets the images, the woman literally becomes a foreign object, the Other, which, as with the eye of the camera, halts the storyline (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975). As her image disrupts the narrative, the woman is built into the narrative as an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, causing the (homogenous hegemonic heteronormative) male characters to *sadistically* investigate or *fetishize* (exalt) the female form through voyeuristic scopophilia (Mulvey, 1975).

Predictably, like the eye of the camera, the male characters in this series most often perform sadistic voyeurism with the hypersexualized Natasha. Not only does the eye of the camera often subjugate her body, so does the gaze of the male characters, particularly in *Iron Man 2* (2010) when her character is introduced into the series. Men blatantly ogle Natasha, and, on several occasions, Tony openly stares at her body. The first appearance of Natasha causes both men and women to pause to notice her attractive form. Natasha’s image becomes so jarring that Tony becomes tongue-tied (a rarity) and his bodyguard drops his guard during their boxing match, causing him to get knocked down. Tony stops every activity to literally investigate this new female presence and her body, suddenly engrossed in researching her modeling images online while glaring at her body in person, subjugating her body in two ways. Their male sadistic scopophilia devalues Natasha, reducing her to a body to be investigated. Peggy also experiences the devaluation of her body when meeting the new army recruits. Even after introducing herself as their superior, one brash cadet whistles at her and makes cutting remarks while visually ogling her (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011).

The love interests best exemplify fetishistic voyeuristic scopophilia in the series. By fetishizing the figure of the woman, she becomes a perfect product. All the superheroes gaze affectionately at their women in romantic and protective ways, with a distinct absence of sexualization and the sadistic voyeuristic scopophilia seen with Natasha. During the opening montage of *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), the backstory of how gentle scientist Bruce Banner becomes the gruesome and violent Hulk, a series of images romanticize Betty through the eyes of the Hulk/ Bruce. When Betty is passed out, the Hulk – a typically brutal character fueled by rage who purposefully injures anyone near him despite Bruce’s affections towards them – gazes softly and longingly at the beautiful angelic figure, surprising even the brute himself (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008). Betty’s image is so jarring to the Hulk that it ends his rampage, allowing Bruce to retake control of his alter ego once the Hulk became distracted and emotionally disarmed by fetishizing Betty’s image.

Similarly, Steve Rogers often looks stunned and in awe of Peggy, becoming tongue tied when she emerges from the crowd of men in a tasteful red dress (*Captain America*, 2011). The image of Peggy’s body stands out in the sea of burly, dirty men in drab army green. Men boastfully singing, brawling, and exhibiting general drunken behavior suddenly stop, and all eyes fixate on Peggy as she walks through the crowd with her eyes locked with an astounded Steve. It is obvious that this effort is for just him, creating a pretext to feminize and further romanticize Peggy. Thor, like Steve and Bruce, romantically views Jane. When he left Earth, after only knowing Jane for a day, Thor vows his love to her and gives her a romantic look of love so intense that she, out of character, passionately kisses him (*Thor*, 2011). This not only startles Thor, but disrupts the pressing action of saving his world immediately as his warriors are calling out to him to hurry. In *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), Thor uses the sky as a surrogate for Jane,

who is living on a different planet. He wistfully gazes into the abysmal sky, remembering how he watched Jane sleep on Earth. Although Thor usually celebrates victories longer than the battles themselves last, Thor can no longer socialize because he is consumed with thoughts of Jane. Rather than celebrate with his men, Thor leaves to receive nightly updates on her image and behavior from the Asgardian Watcher who sees every living thing in the galaxy. This causes him to protectively gaze at her when they do reunite for the duration of the film, and romantically gazes at her each time she faints as if she is merely an angel dreaming and not someone in need of medical attention.

Even Tony Stark, the renowned womanizer, places a romantic, fetishistic gaze on Pepper, effectively changing his narrative from self-absorbed womanizer (who sadistically gazes at women) to protective boyfriend as the Iron Man plotlines develop. Both the villain Aldrich Killian and Tony covet Pepper's body through fetishistic scopophilia in *Iron Man 3* (2013). Killian, who has had a crush on Pepper for years, twirls her around to present her body to himself, taking time out of their business meeting to fetishize Pepper's body. Indeed, both Killian and Tony literally argue about Pepper's body perfection in *Iron Man 3* (2013); when Killian claims that he would have made Pepper physically perfect with his Extremis serum, Tony replies, "She was already perfect!" This quite literally solidifies their fetishistic scopophilia with Pepper's body.

Moreover, because these women in this series react favorably to these gazes and often reward the men with affection (with the exception of Natasha), the scopophilia of the eye of the character suggests that women desire being romantically or sexually objectified. The women in this series subconsciously become aware that they are being watched, and change their behavior favorably to match their objectifiers' desires. Thus, the images the women present on screen are

products – of sex, of glamour, of desire, etc. – whether they are feminized, sexualized, fetishized, or punished. The environment is littered with attractive female images, creating a world where women’s beauty is perfected and interchangeable among the models and physical goddesses that fill the background, adding the patriarchal and postfeminist schema-based knowledge and automatic myths that may be absorbed by viewers and further validating Mulvey’s and Berger’s notion that men want the images and women want to be the images. Whether or not spectators are absorbing these patriarchal ideologies is unknown as there is no direct research on the impact these films have on actual audiences, but what is known is that the cinematic male gaze is present in the Marvel Avengers series and that these films are drawing in record box office numbers. Given automaticity and the presence of myths promoted and authenticated throughout these images, it is likely that they are absorbed, but the impact is unknown.

This may result in the internalization of women’s objectification as desirable. Caroline Heldman (2012) developed the Sex Object Test to measure the presence of sexual objectification in images.²² If any one of seven criteria is present within the image, sexual objectification occurs. This series meets at least four criteria in all eight films. The images of women in the Marvel Avengers – particularly the main female characters – unabashedly satisfy at least one requirement of the Sex Object Test in nearly every scene containing a woman: only showing part(s) of a sexualized body, showing the sexualized body as interchangeable, showing the sexualized body as a commodity, and suggesting that the defining characteristic of that person is sexual availability.²³ As previously discussed, objectification has a very negative impact on

²² The Sexual Object Test was developed to gauge the objectification of the female body in advertising, but is universally applicable to all images and genders.

²³ This series also satisfies the other three requirements with isolated scenes (but are not as prevalent as the previous three violations): the image presents a sexualized body as a stand-in for an object, the image treats the sexualized body as a canvas, and the image affirms the idea of violating a sexualized body.

women.²⁴ The reinforcement of the so-called postfeminist empowerment through hypersexuality or hyperfemininity is reinforced in several different images in every scene involving women. Because the patriarchal objectifying images are numerous and powerful, and Berger notes that women (sub)consciously understand that they are constantly being watched, the male gaze becomes an internalized oppression framed as desirable, particularly when these films authenticate such myths for schema building.

Thus, the Marvel Avengers series, which reflects dominant patriarchal ideology, reproduces a postfeminist internalization of the male gaze as desirable rather than oppressive. With eyes of the camera and characters framing the women as romantically or sexually desirable, the male gaze becomes conflated with desirability in spite of blatantly objectifying the female body through scopophilic voyeurism. These constructions of the male gaze inform and simultaneously are informed by the active male/ passive female paradigm, previously discussed.²⁵ The active male/ passive female paradigm naturalizes this objectification by establishing power divides. Since postfeminism constructs female sexual empowerment as hyperfeminized or hypersexualized without a critical focus, the objectification becomes internalized as a misguided source of empowerment.

Stereotypes: Antiquated Virgin/Whore Binary Replicated as Female Tropes

The postfeminist representations of females in this series align with common female stereotypes and tropes, conventions on which many superhero films rely. Common in film is the

²⁴ Please refer to the Literature Review: Sexism and Objectification.

²⁵ Please refer to the section *Power Dynamics*.

female binary of the virgin/ whore that assumes female sexuality can be only reserved and purified (the virgin) or sexualized and debased (the whore) and frequently replicates female tropes, such as the femme fatale and the damsel in distress. Given that the male gaze represents dominant patriarchal ideology disguised as postfeminism and constructs mainstream cinema, the male gaze often constructs stereotypes which influences subconscious knowledge about gender roles and sexuality.

The Marvel Avengers series are ripe with postfeminist female stereotypes.

Notwithstanding that every woman in these films is a hegemonic white female (heterosexual, educated, upper-middle class, etc.) representing hegemonic white feminine beauty (light skin, thin, delicate features, smooth hair, etc.), these females replicate a new era of stereotypes for women: modern women that emphasize romance, sexiness, fashion, and /or femininity without a political or critical context. These are women who appear to be dedicated to their careers, but eventually prioritize their relationships with strong successful men. They appear smart and attractive but possess some mitigating factor to decrease their power. Jane is a clumsy, flighty astrophysicist who loses crucial evidence in her research and twice hits Thor with her car (*Thor*, 2011). Jane's intelligence and beauty could be threatening but her quirky and clumsy behavior – such as running off the road when attempting to romantically peer at Thor while driving – infantilizes her sexuality, negating the threat. Her intelligence is constantly questioned due to her scattered nature, sudden unfounded belief in magic as science, and/ or status as a mere human (rather than a godlike Asgardian).

Likewise, Peggy is an aggressive, active female in her military field yet becomes passive sexually, waiting for Steve to take control and make the first move. She goes out of her way to feminize herself for Steve in order to present herself as potential girlfriend material (*Captain*

America, 2011). Peggy also constantly tells Steve, who is accustomed to her frank and direct nature in all other aspects, that he “still doesn’t know a bloody thing about women” every time he misses her romantic hints (*Captain America*, 2011). Not only does this reinforce that the man should ask the woman out, but also that once a woman is (traditionally) feminized, she becomes a suitable love interest. Conversely, Natasha is hypersexualized but not sexually empowered; her sexuality threatens men and women alike. Because Natasha’s body is a desired conquest, not a single character views Natasha as more than her perceived hypersexuality.

Notably, Pepper is the most stereotypically postfeminist woman of the set. Pepper is the epitome of postfeminist femininity and sexuality: a confident woman who does not worry about political commitment but rather individual concerns like romance, sexiness, and femininity, portraying a Marilyn Monroe-esque debutante in the latest fashion with a powerful boyfriend and a spotlight for over-exposure, complete with a women-can-have-it-all ending – but without a critical feminist focus. The narrative and characters reduce Pepper to a pretty girlfriend in spite of her high powered position because she prioritizes Tony over everything, including her important job. Even her bodyguard tattles to Tony when she meets with an attractive male at work, evaluating her work responsibilities to be a threat to Tony’s relationship (*Iron Man 3*; 2013). Tony and Pepper constantly bicker with sharp wit, portraying their relationship as charming when, in fact, it is unhealthy and unstable. Tony undermines Pepper at every opportunity, goes against her wishes, buys her forgiveness and love, and is always placing himself as superior to her. Pepper constantly nags Tony and formulaically threatens to leave if he does not change (the ultimate girlfriend cliché). Her postfeminist happy ending values Pepper superficially with her powerful boyfriend as her defining characteristic – a boyfriend who clearly does not respect her. Thus, Pepper is the ultimate postfeminist stereotype: she appears

empowered and with agency, but has no critical focus of feminism that situates political or cultural context, diminishing many dimensions of her life and character. Pepper is depoliticized as her purpose is merely to support the superhero.

These constant postfeminist female stereotypes throughout the Marvel Avengers series contribute to Gorham's automaticity that occurs when both men and women access information about women and reify sexist or postfeminist stereotypes about women within schema-based knowledge. With every compounding complaint, Pepper reinforces the stereotype that women are nags. Every time Jane accidentally drives off the road or hits something with her car, this reinforces the stereotype that women are bad drivers or should not drive; and so forth. The men eat constantly while the women are never seen eating, even while seated at a meal in a restaurant, suggesting that men need constant nourishment while women should watch their figures. This even becomes a running joke in the Thor plotline, where Thor needs constant nourishment to the amazement of his human friends, while Jane is always shown picking at her food rather than eating it. These examples may seem subtle, insignificant, or even unnoticeable, but the insignificance of it makes it manifest in the subconscious and naturalizes the myths that begin the cycle.

Tropes, common in the superhero genre, often reduce women to limiting stereotypes and clichés. The femme fatale, commonly portrayed as threats in superhero films, represent a new voluptuous brand of postfeminism on screen. Literally translated as 'fatal woman,' the femme fatale is a hypersexualized woman who allures and manipulates men to do her bidding or into compromising (and often dangerous) situations with her seductive charms.²⁶ The counterpart to

²⁶ Femme Fatales use their sexuality to manipulate and control men but do not necessarily enjoy or explore their sexuality.

sexually pure ‘good girls,’ and best represented in film noir, this female trope stems from mythology, folklore, and history, with women like Cleopatra, Anne Boleyn, Delilah, Catwoman, Aphrodite, and Lady Macbeth representing the archetype (Andrews, 2007; Rooks, 2009). As hypersexualized representations stigmatize female sexuality with inappropriate/ non-normative sexuality and debasement, these tropes can either sexually objectify women for male pleasure and disposal or fetishize women’s sexuality. Ironically, even though women are viewed as the supposed weaker sex, femme fatales have a rumored defiant nature and can initiate ‘wanton destruction’ at will (Andrews, 2007; Rooks, 2009). As a result, ‘unchecked’ female sexuality, often construed as erratic, manipulative, and threatening by nature, typically attributes to men’s downfall and chaos (Andrews, 2007; Levine, 2008; Rooks, 2009). This legitimizes the notion that female sexuality is treacherous and must be dominated for a superior patriarchal order to thrive. Moreover, not only can this assert anxieties about women’s sexuality, but also insecurities about weakened masculinity through this perceived threat of the sexualized woman (Rooks, 2009). This reconfirms the myth that women hold more societal power based on sexual manipulation and deceit, often causing women to internalize this myth as their only form of social power (Sarkeesian, 2011).

Natasha/ Black Widow clearly represents the femme fatale. The code name ‘Black Widow’ itself is a nod to the hypersexualized trope. Although an Avenger, Natasha has no superhero power; her ‘power’ is her sexuality. Natasha’s opening scene in *The Avengers* (2012) shows her tied to a chair in a little black dress while rough looking Russian mobsters interrogate her. She bats her eyelashes and pretends to be an innocent, slow-witted female spy, stunned that her reputation is lethal. Needless to say, this is a ruse to get information. Her demeanor changes from innocent and flirty to cold and arrogant, and the men quickly fall victim to her looks and

fists. This establishes that Natasha will use her sexuality to get what she wants and should not be trusted. In *Iron Man 2* (2010), Natasha, under assignment from S.H.I.E.L.D., poses as Tony's sexy yet intellectual and highly competent personal assistant. Not only is she sent there to monitor and protect Tony, she also administers medicine to curb his palladium poisoning from his electromagnetic heart. Upon discovering that she works for S.H.I.E.L.D., however, Tony feels betrayed and immediately reduces Natasha to a femme fatale who sexually manipulated him rather than someone who aided his personal *and* professional recovery.

Despite her enormous help, her desire for the same common goals, and her lack of sexual expression outside Black Widow's strategic use, her sexually threatening image portrays Natasha as untrustworthy and sexually manipulative, the femme fatale with ulterior motives. Furthermore, because she is hypersexualized as the femme fatale, Natasha cannot be a love interest (at best a lust-interest), replicating the whore polarity. Natasha serves as the hypersexualized representation of Tony's sexual desires in contrast to Pepper's hyperfeminized sexuality – the virgin – in *Iron Man 2* (2010). Pepper breaks Tony's womanizing mold because not only is she sexually purified through her hyperfemininity, she is also a caretaker which causes Tony to romanticize her. However, Tony needs to shed his womanizing ways in order to value the virgin over the whore. Realizing that Natasha is a spy assigned to monitor him by S.H.I.E.L.D. pushes Tony to devalue the previously coveted Natasha as the femme fatale and the whore, allowing him to finally choose the virgin. It is also no coincidence that, despite her incredibly close relationship with the Avenger Clint Barton/ Hawkeye, Natasha has no element of love in the films. Natasha is assumed to use her sexuality and body to deceive men, whether they are good or bad. Although clearly a sexually attractive woman, she is not a desirable partner

due to her hypersexuality and perceived sexual agency and empowerment thereof. Tony best exemplifies this; he desires Natasha's body, but not Natasha herself.

Conversely, the damsel in distress, one of the most prevalent and time-worn female tropes which is common in superhero plotlines, is usually a plot device in which a female character acts as a passive victim and motivation for the hero's quest, signifying a subject/ object dichotomy (Sarkeesian, 2013; Gervais et.al., 2011). The damsel in distress is a helpless woman in need of rescuing whose beauty attracts her savior (Sarkeesian, 2013). Stemming from centuries of legends, folklore, and pop-culture – examples such as Andromeda, Lady Marion, Sleeping Beauty, Ann Darrow, Princess Peach, and nearly every Bond Girl love interest – the damsel naturally transfers to film as familiar stories and arcs are retold and replicated (Sarkeesian, 2013). At the turn of the 20th century, victimized young women become the cliché of choice for the burgeoning film industry as it provides an easy and sensational plot device for the silver screen. According to Sarkeesian (2013), the damsel in distress trope quickly became the “go-to motivational hook” to arouse “adolescent male power fantasies” to sell more products to (heteronormative) boys and men. She asserts that relationships of emotional bonds that develop between the damsel and the male hero are used to trigger emotional responses in the audience, structuring this intimacy as dependent upon the female character's disempowerment and victimization.

The saving of a defenseless woman is often portrayed as the *raison d'être* – or reason for existence – in romance tales or poems to prove a hero's chivalry, prowess, and virtue. As a literary formula, John Cawelti (2013) argues,

The hero often receives, as a kind of side benefit, the favors of one or more attractive young ladies... the erotic interests served by these attendant damsels are more in the nature

of frosting on the cake. The true focus of interest in the adventure of the story is the character of the hero and the nature of the obstacles he has to overcome. This is the simplest and perhaps the oldest and widest in appeal of all story types (78).

The male protagonist, on whom the story focuses and from whose perspective the story is told, is the subject. The damsel is literally the object being acted upon, reduced for the benefit of the male arc as a reward to be won, causing this trope to be about her objectification and not the woman herself. This disempowers female characters in order to empower male characters, usually denying women self-determination, independence, agency, and the opportunity to be their own archetypal heroes (Sarkeesian, 2013). A damsel can certainly be dynamic, likeable, or helpful, such as a love interest given a chance to help the superhero – what Sarkeesian labels as ‘*the helpful damsel*’ – but these are often token gestures of pseudo-empowerment that maintain sexism (Sarkeesian, 2013).

The love interests in the Marvel Avengers are postfeminist damsels in distress: helpful damsels. Despite the fact they are given token positions of power or authority, these women function as rewards and love interests rather than autonomous active females. Betty, Pepper, and Jane are relatively powerful women in their fields. However, in relation to their narratives, each one of these women can only aid the superhero and are in need of rescue. Betty is very helpful to Bruce in terms of (calmly) transporting him to a research facility but never is given the opportunity to utilize her specialized expertise and experience in their scientific field, and she needs to be rescued a multitude of times (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008). In the Iron Man plotlines, Pepper is given token administrative tasks to aid the capture of the villains. In the first film, at Tony’s bidding, she confirms his business partner’s involvement with illegal trades and leads S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to this villain’s lair, only to be trapped and in need of rescue by Tony/ Iron Man (*Iron Man*, 2008). Her role in the second film is identical; she calls the police and stays to

monitor the clean-up and evacuation, once again leading to her eventual need of rescue (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). The third installment refers to the hostage Pepper as a series of objects for the hero's quest – a “trophy,” a “motivation,” and an “incentive” – to trap Tony (*Iron Man 3*, 2013). Even though the damsel briefly saves the day, the hero saves the damsel from herself and alleviates the threat of their equal standing, as discussed earlier.²⁷

Unlike Pepper and Betty, Jane at first is not in need of rescue, yet she still is ultimately limited to the helpful damsel role. In the first film in the Thor plotline, Jane is reduced to caretaking abilities. Jane's research is viewed as unfounded or outlandish, so she becomes useful by providing help to Thor by offering a ride to reclaim his hammer and comforting him when he believes his father has died (*Thor*, 2011). Although she is never captured by Loki, Loki successfully uses Thor's infatuation with Jane against Thor, threatening to torture and kill her to entice him to fight. Yet, in the second Thor film, Jane is reduced to a damsel in distress, removing any element of being able to help until the end of the film where she is given the token task of helping another male scientist conduct his work. Jane chooses not to defend herself and relies on Thor to fight on her behalf – physically and verbally. Previously, in the first film, Jane appeared to have potential to be empowered in the Thor plotlines but instead becomes a passive victim in the second film.

Peggy, though, is worth particular note. She is not a damsel per say (proving to be a more active female) but Peggy is merely a helpful tool for Steve in relation to the Captain America plotline, providing guidance and motivation for him to save the day. Furthermore, Peggy is the only active female love-interest who does not have a reoccurring role in the plotlines; she

²⁷ See Power Dynamics.

remains a one-film love interest, suggesting that passive women as love interests are more desirable and their relationships are more sustainable than with active women. Sadly, despite all her capabilities, Peggy's purpose to the story still remains to serve as the love interest and motivation for the hero's arc rather than to develop her own identity or arc. This suggests that a woman's capability is not as important as a man's, and that her primary role is that of support and love.

These constructions of female tropes attempt to reify the sexist belief that power imbalances within intimate relationships are customary. They normalize vulnerable, passive, subordinate, powerless, or hyperfeminized women as desirable, and powerful, capable, self-sufficient, or hypersexualized women as threatening. Furthermore, tropes promote the consumption of hegemonic ideologies, like what it means to be a woman and society's expectations of them. Accordingly, as postfeminism constructs the female stereotypes, tropes, and binaries in the Marvel Avengers series, postfeminism serves to maintain and normalize the dominant patriarchal ideology represented in film. This creates a vicious cycle that is subconsciously consumed and polarizes these representations in the virgin/ whore dichotomy. Although these helpful damsels may not be virgins, their virginal (and nurturing) qualities take priority to any (non-love related) feature. Once again, postfeminism assumes displaced sexual agency and empowerment. These women appear to have sexual choices but instead pine for their superheroes. By translating this love through caretaking and further purifying their sexualities, they are rewarded for these feminized skills by 'winning' the love of their superheroes.

The Marvels' Avengers films give duplicitous service to the idea of creating a worthwhile female character, opting instead for the superficiality of postfeminist tropes. On a surface level, it may appear that this series attempts to challenge certain patriarchal stereotypes

by sexually empowering women, increasing their relevance to the plotlines, and decreasing their status as merely helpless victims. However, as these miniscule attempts project postfeminist sensibilities in which traditional femininity is revered along with superficial sexual empowerment, the series instead reinforce patriarchal dominant ideology. Apart from Black Widow's inclusion as a buxom set piece that can hold her own in a fight, little effort is made in trying to create characters who escape these recycled sexist themes.

Language Construction: Disempowering Women through Invisibility, Essentializing, and Jokes

Language is socially constructed – therefore unstable and constantly changing – and creates knowledge that upholds the status quo of current power (Servon, 1993). Thus power is productive of behaviors and other knowledge, and can reproduce socially constructed ‘truths.’ Feminist sociolinguists are concerned with differences between the verbal behavior of genders as indicators and producers of inequality, and want to subvert categorizations that destabilize, fragment, or cause invisibility or political silencing (Cameron, 1993). Sociolinguistically, postfeminism is problematic. By misunderstanding the purpose of third-wave feminism as a misguided hypersexualized movement, postfeminism uses the same language as feminist discourses but fails to contextualize and create solidarity and change, and ultimately reinforces gender divides (Cameron, 1993; Lillian, 2007; Servon, 1993). This becomes even more problematic considering the prevalence of sexist language and that postfeminism renders women politically invisible. Linguistic sexism – specific lexical choices such as the false generic (defaulting to masculine forms when gender is unknown), unequal word pairs (such as man and wife), sexist titles (such as fireman or policeman), etc. – maintains women's invisibility (Lillian,

2007). Most perpetuation of language that promotes oppression is attributed to the marginalization of the Other and the lack of awareness, understanding, and sensitivities thereof (Lillian, 2007; Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Staples, 2011).

Linguistic invisibility is present in the Marvel Avengers series both in job titles and in the treatment of women in their fields. Tony tells Pepper that Maya Hansen, a former sexual conquest, works with plants when she is a “biological DNA coder who runs of team of forty out of privately funded think tank with unique expertise in regeneration” (*Iron Man 3*, 2013). When Tony discovers he is in a military escort driven by a female soldier in *Iron Man* (2008), he exclaims, “dear god, you’re a woman!” This creates a giggle among the soldiers and Tony refuses to apologize for his sexist assumptions, further naturalizing linguistic invisibility as correct. Additional to linguistic invisibility is linguistic sexism. Flight attendants are called “stewardesses” in *Iron Man* (2008) who double as strippers, furthering reducing the need to use the appropriate job title. *Directory Fury* refers to the only woman on the Security Council as “council woman” rather than ‘councilor’ or ‘council member’ in *The Avengers* (2012). Furthermore, the main female characters suddenly appear as ‘exceptional’ women – special cases that account for extraordinary women that break the mold rather than accepting any woman as just as capable as these ‘special’ women (or men)– in comparison to the stewardesses and other female working women, whose job titles and treatment are given inferior labels. Such linguistic invisibility examples maintain patriarchy, privileges men’s power and authority while dismissing women’s contributions, even within the same field.

Sexism also systematically constrains women’s language use. It essentializes all female communication, reduces their access to linguistic resources, and diminishes women’s experiences and expression (Bucholtz, 2004). Even though interactional styles are specific to

activity and not gender, sexism allows different acceptable linguistic behaviors for men and women which validates the denigration of women's language (Bucholtz, 2004; Swacker 1975). Peggy and Pepper frequently use passive aggressive language when angry with their superhero lovers and Pepper downgrades herself constantly. The rare time Tony attempts to give Pepper a compliment for helping complete the building of Stark Tower in *The Avengers* (2012), asking her "how does it feel to be a genius?," Pepper replies that she wouldn't know. When Tony tries to reiterate, exclaiming that "all this [the building] came from you," Pepper shakes her head and quietly responds, "no, all this came from that [Tony's electromagnetic heart, the source of his power and Iron Man suits]." Even though Pepper is correct, the design, the mechanics, and the building of the tower come from Tony's brain and brawn (his Iron Man suit), rather than take this rare compliment, Pepper rejects it, replicating the usual denigration that Tony supplies. This eventually turns into Tony's usual backhanded compliments, telling her that she can take 12% of the credit. It becomes obvious that Pepper feels like she deserves more credit, exclaiming, "Only 12%? Of my baby?" and becoming passive aggressive. Pepper's initial denial of credit maintains the sexist notion that 'good girls' are modest, and that women 'fish' for compliments by denigrating themselves or their abilities. Furthermore, Pepper and Tony provide an excellent example of how passive-aggressive banter in a relationship is framed as witty and fun rather than disempowering. This becomes problematic because it paints relationships as being a struggle for power with a punishment system as somehow desirable through the guise of sharp wit. Although Pepper can mostly keep up with Tony's insensitive verbal foreplay, it typically ends with Tony gaining the verbal upper-hand by ending their banter with dismissive comments. Tony and Pepper's entire relationship, from working to romantic, is based on a never-ending series of putdowns, denigration, and backhanded compliments as a constant display of power struggle.

All the love interests use typically disempowered language that is often associated with women, like fillers (such as “uh” and “um” and general stammering), qualifiers (phrases that negate a direct or assured statement like “I think that...”), and hedging (small questions that negate a direct or assured statement like “...don’t you think?”). The usually direct Peggy stammers when she sees Steve’s chiseled body, a sign of being impressed and physically subordinate to him; Jane also stammers when around Thor and uses hedgers and qualifiers as a way to disempower her expertise and knowledge. Although it could be argued that some language features that are typically associated with women are not necessarily disempowering but merely a different way in which women communicate with each other (Bucholtz, 2004), they are used purposefully to disempower in this Marvel series. For comparison, Steve Rogers, typically shy and awkward, uses these disempowering features associated with the love interests, particularly stammering. Before Steve becomes Captain America, he is a scrawny, awkward kid who could never get a date and is intimidated by women (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011). He stammers and uses fillers just like the women in this series, disempowering him. This is in contrast to his superhero ego, Captain America, who is always confident and in control, and uses direct language features typically associated with powerful men, like commands (as opposed to requests). Steve’s disempowered language use shows his transformation from bumbling kid to alpha male superhero. However, the women in the series continue to use language that is framed as disempowering despite their authoritative jobs titles.

Furthermore, the women in this series tend to end their sentences in high inflection, a feature that is typically associated with feeling unsure or needing approval from the listener(s) and considered typical of women. Even S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Maria Hill, when giving orders (which are always given to men), her voice inflects upwards towards the end of her orders,

making them seem more colloquial and like a request than an order. In one instance, Maria gives an order to distract the Hulk, who is currently destroying a hellicarrier, and follows it up with a clearly feminine nurturing comment, “but don’t get too close” (*The Avengers*, 2012) with an upward end inflection, effectively negating the importance of the order (*The Avengers*, 2012). This is in contrast to the men, such as Direct Fury, Agent Coulson, and Captain America, who give direct orders without upward end inflections, making them effectively commands and not requests. This is not to say that upward inflection, by nature, is a powerless speech feature (or exclusively associated with women), but when compared to the men’s and the women’s use of commands, this feature disempowers Agent Hill’s language use in the film.

There are no shortages of examples of pejoration of language used against women in this series either. These lexical differences and representations are folded into discourses and “this context of struggle with a very complex metalinguistic heritage in the English language” (Richardson & Queen, 2012, 328). Standardized by men, the English language is male-dominated and a male-centered language in which women’s language use is the deviation (Bucholtz, 2004; Swacker, 1975). Prejudices, fears, and attitudes about the opposite gender are exposed through the language men use to describe women (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Swacker, 1975). The absence of correct and unstigmatized terms to represent women perpetuates a cultural context that dismisses and derogates females, encouraging women’s feelings of powerlessness and passivity (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001). In *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), when decorated-soldier turned villain Emil Blonsky shoots a female commanding officer for simply standing in front of him while interrogating a scientist, he exclaims, “she’s such a bitch” (*The Incredible Hulk*, 2008). Even though this woman is only a featured extra in a handful of scenes in which her lines include only “yes sir,” this appears to be a believable and acceptable excuse to kill her. In *The*

Avengers (2012), when Natasha tries to inform Bruce that Loki is manipulating him in order to unleash the Hulk who would destroy S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters, Bruce replies, “I’m not leaving just because you get a little twitchy.”

Likewise, when Jane meets Odin, Thor’s father, in *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), he denigrates her as being “mortal” and equates her to an unkempt, uncontrollable farm animal, saying “she does not belong in Asgard any more than a goat belongs at a banquet table” (*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013). Given this exchange, it would hardly appear that Jane is a quantum astrophysicist with specialized knowledge and one of only two humans on Earth who can study the upcoming universe convergence. Moreover, instead of defending herself, she becomes tongue-tied and flattered when she discovers that Thor’s father knows of her. Jane delightfully squeals, “You told your dad about me?” (*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013), thus naturalizing Odin’s disrespectful behavior and pejoration. Considering that Jane spent two years in her mother’s basement wallowing over Thor, for it to seem incredible that Thor would tell his parents about her also implies that women are expected to discuss men and relationships but it is uncommon for men to discuss relationships, particularly with their parents. It additionally implies that women take relationships more seriously than men, and it is acceptable for women to bemoan their relationships while men are expected to move on.

Along with pejoration, objectification of women is also rampant in the Marvel Avengers series. When Tony meets Natasha, he claims, “I want one” (*Iron Man 2*, 2008), referring to the beautiful Natasha as an object rather than a potential personal assistant and human being. In the same film, Stark Industries’ competitor Justin Hammer calls his greatest weapon “the ex-wife” (*Iron Man 2*, 2008) because of all the destruction it creates. In *Iron Man 3* (2013), Tony, constantly says to Pepper that he is afraid to lose her and has to “protect the one thing [Pepper] I

can't live without" (*Iron Man 3*, 2013), turning her into an object and possession. Yet, later Tony, who believed Pepper (his emotional crutch) to be dead, makes insensitive comments and jokes to her upon discovering she is indeed alive.²⁸

Disempowering jokes, jokes that disempower, denigrate, or subordinate women, are rampant throughout the Marvel Avengers films. Disempowering jokes are especially dangerous since they make sexism funny, disarming, and more easily absorbed and accepted. These films provide virtually no mention of women unless it is a brief sexual reference, particularly from the lothario Tony Stark, who has an inappropriate sexualized comment ready for any occasion. When reporter Christine Everhart confronts Tony about war profiteering, she asks if he "ever loses an hour of sleep" (*Iron Man*, 2008), to which he responds, "I'm prepare to lose a few hours with you," (*Iron Man*, 2008) effectively charming Christine into bed. Christine then becomes the butt of Tony's jokes every time they meet, negating her excellent investigative skills. Tony's behavior towards women implies that the sex is more important than the woman, and that women only have sexual value, but is framed as charming and desirable through the use of disempowering jokes. However, although disempowering jokes are expected from Tony, they come from men everywhere. Tony's bodyguard jokes, "of course you don't remember; he's not a tall blonde with a big rack" (*Iron Man 3*, 2013) when Tony cannot remember a potential client. He also jokes that Natasha must know "booty tae bo" (aerobics with boxing moves) when she claims to box (*Iron Man 2*, 2010). Thor chides Sif, the only female Asgardian warrior ever shown, for needing his masculine help. In *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), when she forcefully claims that "I've got this completely under control," Thor replies, "Is that why everything is on

²⁸ Feeling threatened by Pepper's empowerment becomes quite hypocritical. If Tony's fear is losing Pepper, then her new superpowers that make her relatively indestructible and give her super strength should be a source of comfort and relief for his fear of loss anxiety.

fire?” despite the fact that the battle seems to be going in their favor. His father does the same with his mother, Frigga, in a following scene. When Asgard is attacked – a first – by a formidable enemy thought to be extinct for nearly ten thousand years, Odin dismisses Frigga’s looks of concern when he goes to battle. He jokes to his soldiers, “Despite after all my time, my queen still worries about me” (*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013). When Peggy, a commanding officer, introduces herself to the military recruits in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), a soldier teases, “What’s with the accent, Queen Victoria? I thought I signed up for the U.S. Army.” He follows the comment with, “Are we gonna wrestle? Because I know a few moves I *know* you’ll love” when Peggy asserts herself as a superior officer. Both comments receive snickers from other males. It is as if the female gender is meant to serve as one giant joke.

As with postfeminist and sexist discourse, sociolinguistic frameworks understand that media texts are made for (target) audience consumption in relation to cultural life (Richardson & Queen, 2012, 328). Scripts act like speeches that present a unique context that comingles orality and literacy in varying degrees, maximizing natural speech (orality) and thoughtful, purposeful discourse (literacy) (Tannen, 1988). Oral narratives – planned or improvised – exhibit a deeper impact that creates a sense of envelopment for the listener (Tannen, 1988). Sociocultural film criticism uses language as criticism for representation while linguocultural criticism focuses on how films replicate language ideologies and stereotypes (Richardson and Queen, 2012). The language construction in these films are set up in a way to subconsciously absorb and enjoy patriarchal ideology. According to Gorham’s (1999) and Bordwell’s (1992) arguments, by the end of a film, the automaticity of linguistic stereotypes is in full swing, building and reinforcing schema-based knowledge to make elaborations and inferences while viewing and after viewing a film, making it unlikely for a spectator to realize their elaborations are based on subconscious

reception of myths presented by sexism or patriarchally constructed postfeminism. Furthermore, each film adds onto the series' information, compiling even large schema-based knowledge repertoire from automaticity, which is reinforcing more myths to access subconsciously, for viewers to draw elaborations.²⁹ Stereotyping can be cross-cultural and results from playing into certain assumed knowledge (Gorham, 1999; Richardson & Queen, 2012; Sarkeesian, 2012). Certain genres, like the superhero genre, are susceptible to stereotyping due to the media industry's use of standardized products, which suits the production side of media but not necessarily the audience (Richardson and Queen, 2012; Sarkeesian, 2012). Therefore the standardized products, conventions, and constructs contain ideologies that the audience subconsciously accesses in order to make sense of and relate to the films, fortifying Comolli and Narboni's notion that every film is political.³⁰

Like stereotypes, typifications link characters to characterizations and are presented so that they are negligibly detectable to the audience, including what a character can do with the linguistic material provided (Richardson & Queen, 2012). Sexist, postfeminist, or other patriarchal ideologies can be accessed through characterization. Throughout the entire series, women are assumed to be easy targets and conquests, particularly with lady-killer Tony Stark. The sexual interactions Tony has with women seem to follow the typical sexist social scripts. Social scripts – schemas for particular events and their corresponding roles and rules – influence cognitive processing, function automatically, create a 'cognitive neutralizer,' and therefore make such scripts incredibly resilient (Littleton et. al., 2006; Masser et. al., 2006). The normative heterosexual script, in which persuasion tactics are often employed, tends to be male-initiated

²⁹ A spectator can actively reject these myths, but this takes more effort and the myths and stereotypes have already been received.

³⁰ See Literature Review: Postfeminism.

and male-dominant. Due to stigmatization, women's roles in these scripts are that of token resistance to men's sexual advances in order to protect their virtue, causing subtle or indirect behaviors to be taken as cues for sexual interest that keep men's sexual advances persistent (Littleton et. al., 2006). This neutralizes the threat of the non-traditional female gender role challenging masculinity and can serve as a means to dominate and control all women (Masser et. al., 2006). Not only does this script capitalize on men's predatory behavior and women's naivety, it promotes several sexist notions, such as if a woman sleeps with a man it will lead to him developing feelings for her and/ or that all a man needs to change his womanizing ways is the love of a good woman. It also promotes notions that men have an insatiable lust, that men only care about 'one thing' (sex), and/ or that men want a 'lady on the street but a minx in the bed.'³¹

As a result of Tony's womanizing demeanor, nearly every interaction Tony has with women follows this script, justifying and naturalizing these interactions as normal and expected. When Tony meets Maya in *Iron Man 3*, (2013), he spins countless pick-up lines and lies to get Maya into bed, joking to Maya's colleagues, "Do you happen to be a cardiologist? Because she's going to need you after I'm done {blows party horn} with her" (*Iron Man 3*, 2013). The party horn replacing "having sex" (or whatever euphemisms or vulgar phrases could be placed there) makes the joke especially funny and disarming, distracting from the extreme disrespect Tony is showing Maya in front of her professional male peers. Yet this causes even Maya to giggle, effectively placing her protests as token gestures of pseudo empowerment, further naturalizing

³¹ It also confirms 'common sense' explanations like 'she-wanted-it' and 'no-means-yes' (Masser, et. al., 2006). Because of these cues, many incidents of forced intercourse are considered a normative sexual interaction rather than rape – particularly those incidents involving romantic partners, coercion, where minimal force is used (presumably by a familiar person), or in semi-intimate situations where flirting, partying, or drinking is involved. (Littleton, et. al., 2006). People who follow these scripts tend to view the Rape Script to be much more violent and with negative consequence for the victim such as feeling dirty and shamed (Littleton, et. al., 2006). Additionally, as these scripts represent 'traditional' or 'normal' sexual interaction, they are often confused with seduction rather than acquaintance or psychic rape (male hostility masked by seduction).

the motions of maintaining a ‘good girl’ image. Maya pretends to insist that she will not sleep with him, saying things like “You can see my research, but you can’t see my [body]” (*Iron Man 3*, 2013) and makes fun of him for blatantly lying to get her into bed, questioning if it ever works for him. Yet, despite all her protests, Maya sleeps with Tony. Her giggly attitude and excuses of being drunk normalized her so-called protests as token gestures that align with this sexual script that ‘good girls’ want men to make the first move and be aggressive.

Additionally, these films perpetuate the notion that women seek revenge when jilted and are jealous of other women. Peggy violently scolds Steve when she finds him kissing a woman, even though Steve believed Peggy was dating Howard Stark. She claims that he’s “just like all the rest [of the classless soldiers],” and makes passive-aggressive comments during their work meetings that imply that Steve wants to make out with other women, like “we’re ready for you if you’re not otherwise occupied” and “I’m quite sure the captain has some unfinished business” (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011). Rather than confronting Steve to clear up any miscommunication or disclosing her feelings to him, Peggy uses passive-aggressive language while claiming she is not thinking about that kiss. In *Iron Man 3* (2013), former one-night stand Maya Hansen comes back as a villain thirteen years later, still bitter that Tony sexually used her. Given Tony’s treatment of women, it can be expected that Tony has left a wake of jilted women over the years as he only views women as disposable sex toys (which validates Pepper as an exceptional woman narrative, the right woman to change the man), and yet the only two women who want revenge are built into the narrative rather than all the other women who have moved on.

Additionally, there is an omnipresent notion that women are subordinate to men due to the lack of conversations with women. Agent Maria Hill must walk behind Director Fury and

Agent Coulson, and ask questions from their backside in *The Avengers* (2012). The men respond in third person and never turn to face her. Fury and Coulson appear to have a conversation between themselves with Maria trying to weigh in with little respect/ consideration given to her. Even when Coulson leaves, she still must walk behind Fury and only once does Fury face her in order to show his disapproval of her. Jane's expertise is never needed in Asgard, dismissed as "human science," even when the Dark Elves invade and actively seek her out (*Thor: The Dark World*, 2013). Tony denies Maya even the professional courtesy of discussing work-related topics, like explaining his changes to her research, which he had promised to do (*Iron Man 3*, 2013). Maya is much more eager to talk with Tony than to sleep with him.

Language is an important factor in maintaining sexism. Many of these examples are very subtle, but cumulatively they perpetuate postfeminism and patriarchy. With each example, linguistic sexism subconsciously adds to the automaticity and schema-based knowledge that becomes difficult to consciously notice and/ or resist. It would be easy to decry sexism if the characters call women bad names and tell them that their lives and careers are inferior. Instead, internalized sexist oppression is subtly reinforced through linguistic invisibility, disempowering language, pejoration, and perpetuation of stereotypes and stereotypical themes in the nuanced language used throughout the series, making sexism more acceptable. Sexism and postfeminism is then preserved through language as funny, witty, and desirable.

DISCUSSION

As demonstrated, the Marvel Avengers series is ripe with postfeminist representations of women that maintain gender divides and patriarchy. These films reflect previous scholarship almost perfectly. Through the presentation of power, image, tropes, and language, these films represent a marginal view of women who only function to serve the men's needs and desires, dismissing the realities that women face. Pegging women into binary positions – feminized/sexualized, virgin/whore, caretaker/manipulator, etc. – negates the fancy postfeminist updating to their roles as the women are mostly still relegated to portrayals as caretakers, victims, and/or subservient beings. Whereas the superheroes explore existential themes and mission conventions of self-sacrifice for the greater good, the women remain objects to benefit the men's arcs, which denies them agency and falsifies empowerment through traditional gender expectations. This series continues to prop up postfeminism, internalize and naturalize objectification and oppression as desirable rather than problematic, and further normalize stereotypes and gender divisions of power. Without a critical or political focus or context that can situate these women in the real world, as a third-wave or academic post-feminist feminist lens would do, these female representations fall short of actual female potential. As postfeminist representations, Marvel's women reinforce the patriarchal unconscious through automaticity and schema building of gendered power divisions, images, stereotypes, and language. Considering that all the females in these films are hegemonic white women with similar images, they are not representative of most women. In fact, there are barely a handful of women present in this series, with *Captain America: the First Avenger* and *The Incredible Hulk* having only one female relevant to the plot, creating extreme female invisibility and loss the collective self. With the exception of these five women and five supporting female characters – *in eight films* – all other women are completely

interchangeable. Simply, without critical focus, context, or discussion, the series fails to represent the diversity of women's experiences.

Naturally, as women gain more rights and visibility in reality, timeworn patriarchal representations of woman as victims and caretakers need to be reformulated in order to stay relatively realistic to modern life. The same old plotlines in which women are helpless and foolish victims who require superior men to save them may become tiresome to audiences (Sarkeesian, 2012). As women become more visible in society, portrayals reminiscent of the love interest tied to railroad tracks screaming for her superhero to save her become too repetitive, predictable, and less enjoyable as society progresses. To achieve this modernization, the easiest solution is to redress the female characters as having more inherent power or intelligence regardless of male influence. However, this poses a potential threat; if the women are too strong, capable or intelligent, they would not need heroes around to help constantly. Additionally, if those in need of rescue contain no emotional investment or are too capable to suspend belief in their need of rescue, this decreases the invested interest in the act itself, and maybe the superhero or his arc (Sarkeesian, 2013).

Thus enters postfeminism, giving a convenient way to superficially empower women without threatening or disempowering superheroes since there is no critical or political context in which the women exist. Ergo, this increase in empowerment is merely a token gesture since these women have no real structural or critical power as these narratives frame love as their only power. As shown, Pepper Potts is a great example of this postfeminist repackaging. It appears that poised fashion and quick come-back lines are equated with power rather than major contributions to the plotlines in the Marvel Avengers films. Every scene subconsciously reinforces patriarchal constructed postfeminism's artificial power: femininity and sexuality as

power rather than politically or institutionally significant power. This ultimately emphasizes the traditional and non-feminist notion that women's power still lies in dyadic (relationship or intimacy) power rather than structural. So, despite Marvel's crafty postfeminist lens and token or pseudo empowerment, the female characters in this series reflect a cultural embrace of postfeminism and fulfill the same roles and purposes as earlier representations while making patriarchy more difficult to detect.

Of course, not everything regarding these female representations in this series is oppressive. These women have excellent jobs, are experts in their fields, are more proactive regarding their relationships than previously depicted in the comic book genre, and exercise sexual empowerment, autonomy, and agency. In the Iron Man comic series, Pepper remains Tony's personal assistant, but in this cinematic series, she is given the role CEO of his company (by his power of course and without adequate credentials or approval). Peggy and Natasha in particular seem to be more diverse reflections of women than the others since they have relatively important positions in a male dominated field (the military) and prove to be very capable and driven. Given the occasional, perhaps even accidental, glimpses into these women's motivations, realities, and backstories, their personal arcs could make powerful narratives. Even though the narratives revolve around the men, giving the women more critical substance would add more depth to the story overall. However, we know nothing about the women's lives outside of what they do for men or how they affect men. So much time is taken into crafting the superheroes' backstories, motivations, and realities – that span over trilogies – and yet no such consideration is given to the women. There needs to be no stated motivation for these women to date these men, which seems necessary given the men's dangerous natures, jobs, and even inclinations to womanize. It is enough to assume that these women would naturally love these

men, which plays on the common trope that all women need/ want is love, at any cost. The audience must just accept that the men are desired partners, even though dating superheroes is extremely hazardous and comes with a lot of logistical complications.³² Yet there is always motivation for why the men must date these particular women (out of a sea of attractive women on screen) – Jane is the only one who believes Thor; Peggy is the only one who has faith in Steve; Betty is the only one who never gave up on Bruce; and Pepper is the only one who can take care of Tony. It does not matter who these women are or why they are there, they practically are interchangeable. They are virtually invisible except for when it befits the superheroes' stories.

Unfortunately, that which does not directly affect the men in these stories is limited to worn-out tropes in this film series. Natasha has a very complex and fascinating backstory and narrative that could have been diegetically utilized or explain her cold demeanor and talents. Natasha is also given a potentially empowering role in the end of *The Avengers* (2012), but it appears as self-preservation rather for the superhero mission convention of 'the greater good,' once again disempowering Natasha from being a superhero and relegating her to the femme fatale trope who is loyal only to herself. Natasha decides that the broken S.H.I.E.L.D. must stop Loki – not because his army invades Earth, not because it is the right thing to do, not even because she is ordered to do so and must follow orders, but because Loki shamed her for past 'bad girl' behavior. Natasha feels she must regain 'good girl' status (*The Avengers*, 2012). Because this act of redemption is framed as saving her reputation, the act becomes more about

³² Perhaps we can blame the superhero genre for priming us not to question the love interests' love for their superheroes. The genre is so well defined and integrated into our pop culture that it becomes the basis for schema-building knowledge in these stories. Although, most narrative conventions can be traced far back in history, handing down problematic tropes, narratives, and characters that can still be seen in modern day stories, as in comics. For example, Thor plotlines use Norse mythology.

herself than the altruistic superhero theme of self-sacrifice and serving the greater good, a lesson that even the selfish narcissist and privileged superhero Tony realizes eventually. This is in direct violation of the superhero convention in which the mission and greater good must overcome selfish proclivities.

Yet there are several ways in which Marvel could easily include or update more multidimensional representations. Some examples include (but are not limited to) women exhibiting leadership rather than merely given a superficial title, demonstrating adversities women experience that do not revolve around men and lovers, even discussing other aspects in their lives (such as discrimination) outside of stereotypical traditional feminine topics (like men, children, and shopping), and so on. There are also plenty of opportunities to increase women's presence in this series by creating a more realistic representation. Women do not have to function as mere eye candy. A woman could have been on the S.H.I.E.L.D. team that found Captain America, on the senate council that questions Tony Stark, on the pilot team that takes down the Hulk, etc.

The deleted scenes and alternate endings released as special DVD bonuses – which are split up over different DVD editions and plotlines so only select owners of special discs may be entitled to view – reveal much more active roles for women. In the scenes that did not make the final cut in *Iron Man 2* (2010), Pepper has a more active role, makes empowering comebacks to Tony, and even risks her life to save Tony and destroy a villain. Maya is given a redemption scene, where she comes to her senses about her evil boss and her weaponizable research in *Iron Man 3* (2013), causing her to sacrifice not only her research that has been her lifeblood for nearly two decades but also her life. This scene gives Maya power, doing the superhero's work by destroying all the research so it cannot be used again, and yet these forty seconds are

mysteriously absent from the film, leaving a confusing plot hole of why Maya is suddenly killed and what happened to her research. Peggy even has a concluding scene in which she helps found S.H.I.E.L.D. with Howard Stark that is cut from *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and is now a bonus clip to the deluxe edition to another film in the franchise that does not feature Captain America or Peggy Carter. It begs the question of why these scenes of female empowerment that disrupted the stereotypic myths and schemas were cut, particularly when they add to the plot, decrease confusion, could be considered narratively superior scenes, and are only a few minutes – sometimes even seconds – long.

These examples seem to result from the sexist notion (and fear) that empowering women disempowers men. Postfeminism requires a cultural ‘shorthand’ and popular characterization as elements of commodification of certain ‘feminist’ issues in media studies and cinematic postfeminism (Mizejewski, 2006). This characterization accurately portrays how filmmakers, audiences, and the media perceive and conceptualize particular female characters and narratives. Race, class, sexuality, and other important issues are concealed in these new tropes of postfeminist heroines. As Mizejewski so beautifully puts it, “The availability of the commodity posits an egalitarian utopia in which sexual, racial, and ethnic differences among consumers recede – supposedly one of the pleasures of the postfeminist aesthetic.” (2006, 123). This commodification creates postfeminist representations and promotes ‘retro-sexism’ or ‘sexism with an alibi’ – sexism that is cloaked under female empowerment (Martin, 2007).

Postfeminism is apparent in so many aspects of the Marvel Avengers films’ narratives, representations, and presentations that it is hard to ignore. Balio (2013) reports a recent substantial change in Hollywood in which studios are now multi-conglomerates that focus on reliable but substantial returns from each division of the company. To ensure the most profit,

studios “make huge but very calculated bets” (49) on pre-sold content and sequels, displaying a penchant for comic book franchises and live-action films that feature stars and small ensembles with proven box office appeal. The studios, therefore, are heavily invested in promoting time-tested ideologies (such as patriarchy) and representations as demonstrated with their proclivity to the superhero genre, which has an arsenal of potential appealing films. Ergo, audience design – the scale and structure of anticipated audiences – hold significant internal homogeneities related to the target audience (Richardson & Queen, 2012). This plays directly into audience reception – who actually receives these media texts and how they make sense of them – because it creates issues of negotiation and construction of meaning between the audience and the film industry (Richardson & Queen, 2012; Tasker & Negra, 2005). Much of this negotiation is dependent on what the audience already knows and what they bring to their viewing experiences. Film can reach (international) audiences more easily because the development of the narrative and characterization can be summed up in a few hours unlike a comic series. However, it is a commercial endeavor and much of the understanding of language’s part in semiotic materials of these mediums depends on commercial success (Richardson & Queen, 2012). Therefore, media influences spectators in a multitude of identities and discourses through visual cross-cultural symbols (such as the displayed image of the female body) (Gorham, 1999; Richardson & Queen 2012). Superhero films are susceptible to stereotyping due to the media industry’s use of standardization, which plays into these hegemonic discourse like sexism, postfeminism, and patriarchy. Naturally, viewers have the ability to reject these notions, but given the subtlety and complexity of such patriarchal influences presented in constant (if subtle) bombardment, they are primed to accept and absorb rather than actively and consciously reject hegemonic viewpoints.

Thus, both the limitations of the pop-postfeminist heroine and sex, gender, and equality issues are exposed, but only to a critical eye. The plots, scenarios, and themes promoting gendered divides, gender roles, sexualities, and body-obsessions are continually recycled (and marginalize race and sexualities by favoring white, straight, privileged women). Postfeminist films fail to address the paradoxes and ambiguities that most women face in managing the pressures of their public and private lives, and instead construct a multitude of contradictions for women that do not represent their own experiences.

Can We Blame the Comics?

Naturally, certain genres, such as the hypermasculine superhero genre, are more prone to postfeminist critique than others. Yet how much blame can we place on Hollywood when it is merely replicating the comic literature? This pass-the-buck argument provides two scape goats for the film industry and its superhero genre: the comics industry which perpetuates sexism and ties Hollywood's hands to the original creative elements, and the audience, as comic fanatics, for their unyielding expectations.

A common myth about adaptations revolves around the notion of creative control and the 'faithfulness' the adaptation must have to the original work. As scholarship has shown, however, the adaptation is rarely faithful to the work.³³ It appears that almost anyone can have a say in the adaptation, including talent managers and schedulers, but the creator of the original work and the fans often have the least input. Only the most powerful screenwriters and directors can insist that the creators and/ or fans have (limited) input into a particular superhero film in order to draw the

³³ Please refer to 'Superhero Film Genre' in the Literature Review.

fans. Yet, since the ultimate goal of the superhero adaptation is to appeal to a mass audience, it often does so by reducing the narrative to bare basic concepts, which goes against the original work that the creators and fan would appreciate. Marvel in particular, which has the most characters of any comic house and specializes in cross-over stories and characters, have nearly limitless options when creating an adaptation (Zeller-Jacques, 2012). Thus, although the comic books may be blamed for promoting postfeminism, objectification, and other patriarchal elements, given that the filmmakers retain the control in the adaptation, the blame primarily rests on Marvel Studios/ the production and filmmakers who have specifically chosen to portray these monolithic female representations on screen in the Marvel Avengers series.

Furthermore, this ‘blame the comics’ argument ignores the many representations of females in recent superhero films that are more active, diverse, and dimensional characters. Lois Lane from the Superman plotline, by virtue of the comics, is subversive as a hard-nosed reporter trying to battle her way through the male-dominated chauvinistic journalism field. Lois goes out of her way to get the tough, dangerous stories (which conveniently makes her prime for rescuing), ditching the fashion, family, and ‘women’s issues’ pieces that are thrust onto so many female journalists. Lois’ film representation is no less than her comic representation, showing the reality that some working women face sexism in the work place. Lois in *Superman Returns* (2006) constantly battles her editor, who tries to pigeonhole Lois into only writing about Superman. Lois, naturally, wants to investigate the electronic blackout that affected half the east coast rather than write puff pieces, claiming that she is not “Superman’s press secretary” (*Superman Returns*, 2006). Without permission, Lois decides to investigate this story while simultaneously forced to write about Superman. In another Superman adaptation, *Man of Steel* (2013), Lois constantly faces sexism while investigating a military discovery of an unknown

craft in the artic. From the start, Lois faces off with military displays of masculinities. When the commanding officer berates her and refuses to shake her hand, Lois challenges this power play by asserting, “Look, let’s get one thing straight here, guys. The only reason I’m here is because we’re on Canadian soil, and the appellate court overruled your injunction to keep me away. So if we’re done measuring dicks now, could you have your people show me what you found?” (*Man of Steel*, 2013).

However, this is not to say that women must face gender discrimination in order to be considered adequate female representations. The X-Men film trilogy actively subverts gender discrimination by having its most powerful and plot-driving characters as female. Jean Grey and her villainous alter ego, Phoenix, undergo major transformations throughout the trilogy: starting as a timid mutant who is afraid of her powers, culminating into a confidence in her powers, the superhero self-sacrifice to save the world, and eventually succumbing to evil and destroying the world before regaining her original virtue (*X-Men*, 2000; *X-Men: Unite*, 2003; *X-Men: Last Stand*, 2006). Storm is promoted as Professor X’s replacement as Dean of the School for the Gifted and X-Men leader (*X-Men: Last Stand*, 2006). Mystique proves to be the most capable villain who breaks free her ultra-powerful god-like boss Magneto from prison several times even though she only has powers of shape-shifting and not of powerful gifts like other mutants (*X-Men: Last Stand*, 2006). *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2013) shows love interest Gwen Stacy with a backstory, as an intellectually superior to Peter Parker/ Spider-Man, and gives her crucial narrative plot devices.

By no means do these empowered representations need superhero/ villain status to be empowered on the screen. Other typically masculine genres have very empowered women. Women like Mattie Ross in *True Grit* (1968, 2012) have proven to drive the plot and be the

strongest characters. Elisabeth Swan in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series (*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, 2003; *The Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, 2006; *The Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, 2007) transforms from kidnap victim to leader of all pirates who wages war and takes down a corrupt government. Although she begins the plotline as a typical damsel in distress, Elizabeth becomes empowered and confronts gender roles and discrimination, struggling to understand her place and options as a woman in Victorian society. Her arc becomes fully developed over the series, moving away from a love focus into a stand-alone character. Beatrix Kiddo, aka the Bride, singlehandedly obliterates an entire network of assassins of mostly women and a ruthless gang of 88 samurai in *Kill Bill (Vol. 1, 2003; Vol. 2, 2004)*. Eowyn of Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy proves to be the toughest soldier despite extreme gender discrimination, singlehandedly changing the battle of Gondor through her ability to kill an massive Oliphaunt and the immortal Witch King of Angmar whom even the great wizard Gandolf could not kill (nor any man), all while saving the King of Rohan from a gruesome death (although he later dies from his injuries) and another crucial character, Merry (*Return of the King*, 2004). Both the prequels and the original trilogies of *Star Wars* would have no story if it were not for the active roles of Princess Leia and her mother, Queen Amidala (*Star Wars*, 1977; *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980; *The Return of the Jedi*, 1983; *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, 1999; *Star Wars Episode II: The Attack of the Clones*, 2003; *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, 2005). These two active female characters and their plights literally drive the events of all six films. These women discussed are loved characters that prove that even in the most masculine genres that are typically dominated by masculine characters, such as Western, Samurai/ Kung-Fu, Fantasy, or Sci-Fi, women can still prevail as critical and empowered representations.

Naturally, this begs the question of why female representations in the Marvel Avengers series are so hollow, particularly when shown that other cinematic adaptations of Marvel women are more empowered or situated in more critical worlds rather than a vacuum, and that adaptations of superhero comics have liberties in representation that allow more empowered women. The filmmakers and Marvel Studios can assume a significant amount of the blame since they have a substantial control over what is presented in the films. Although the genre can be blamed to a certain extent as there are certain patriarchal elements that are still identifiable within the genre, it is not primarily responsible for the lack luster female representation in the Marvel Avengers series' adaptation as it is the filmmakers and studios that chose to keep any inherited patriarchal elements. However, the production of the Avengers series cannot be wholly responsible for why these representations are flat and vacant. One large possible explanation is the internalization of gender oppression that makes these character representations desirable or seem more 'realistic' than they are, as previously discussed. Another such explanation is the underrepresentation of women in film making and the film and media industry.

Hegemonic Male Gate Keeping

Much of the poor representations of women in film, as in the Marvel Avengers series, is due to the lack of women's influential presence in Hollywood and media. As scholarship has shown, Hollywood often acts as cinematic gate keepers who are partially responsible for the lack of positive, realistic, and/ or empowered female representations and is overwhelmingly controlled and managed by males who placate to hegemonic male spectators. Therefore, realistic and/ or critically empowered female roles are simply not in demand in Hollywood, which instead

chooses to perpetuate sexist tropes, objectification, and other patriarchal oppressions and ideology, as highlighted with the Bechdel Test. As Sarkeesian (2012) simply states, “It’s depressingly clear that Hollywood doesn’t prioritize roles for women and isn’t interested in telling women’s stories.”

As previously discussed, representation of white hegemonic males set the (assumed and privileged but invisible) hegemonic standard that most cinema is based upon. As there is not a problem with a lack of men interacting with one another, men and men’s stories are not underrepresented in films (Sarkeesian, 2012; Powers, 2009). But as there are only a handful of women’s representations to choose from, an institutional pattern with female underrepresentation in the media and film industry continues to perpetuate a lack of the realities women face and female irrelevance, silencing, or invisibility (Sarkeesian, 2012, 2013; Tasker & Negra, 2005). The question of responsibility of diverse and multidimensional female representation on screen is related to the lack of women represented in the industry. Were there more women influencing decisions at all levels (production, distribution, acting, etc.), this question may be of less importance. There is not a single female director or screenwriter in the entire Marvel Avengers series, and only five female producers out of thirty-one producers (imdb.com). If women are underrepresented among directors of the world’s most acclaimed and/ or most profitable films, the amount and range of women’s work on the screen is narrow, maintaining low exposure. If women overall are not given a chance to tackle such films, they will not be seen as profitable filmmakers and will remain pigeonholed. Whether or not increasing women in higher levels in Hollywood will make a substantial impact is unknown since women are rarely given the opportunity.

This might explain that although women's visibility may be increasing, they are being excluded from and decreasing in representation. Not only is it possible that women are internalizing their oppression through postfeminism, objectification, and industry constraints (to name a few), but male gate keeping may keep some women 'playing the (patriarchal) game' for fear of losing their jobs or being blacklisted, which prevents some women from speaking out or changing the representation dynamics. All these factors, and many more, account for why the same cinematic themes and female tropes are constantly made.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, female representations in the Marvel Avengers series reinforce dominant patriarchal ideology. Postfeminism conflates power, sexual empowerment, and agency with (individualized) hyperfemininity or hypersexuality and internalization of the male gaze and objectification. The postfeminist stereotypes/ tropes of this superhero series create monolithic representations of women that ignore critical contextualization. This subconsciously informs female gender roles and sexuality as the male gaze is the main focus of female character construction. Given the construction of postfeminism – its internalization of the male gaze, and its promotion of limiting female representations, stereotypes, and linguistic sexism – removes critical discussion from these female representations, including the notion that the person is political, it becomes difficult to create a more accurate representation of women. A relative female presence in plotlines and representations of women's complete experiences – not just those that pertain to men – seem far from achievement if postfeminist and patriarchal influences in cinema continue to go unchallenged, particularly in typically masculine genres like superhero films in which male arcs often reduce women to trophies. There can be multiple explanations for these representations that range from the superhero genre, the norms within the film industry, internalization of postfeminism, sexism, and objectification as empowering and desirable, and women's overall cinematic invisibility.

This analysis is in no way an exhaustive look into the problems facing female representations in the Marvel Avengers series, and only scratches the surface of the barriers in gender equality in the film and media industry. Needless to say, there are a variety of factors that influence this argument which require further research. As this analysis only explores a few intersecting slices of gender divisive female representation, many more may be at play that could

contribute to such underwhelming representation. Due to constraints, this analysis hardly discusses masculinities or other oppressions at play, such as lack of image, body, racial, class, sexual, and gender variation. It also does not discuss other oppressive ideological themes and tropes. This analysis also briefly examines women in the media industry at large, and the history of media representations of women, which is interrelated to cinematic representations of women in the superhero genre. Female representations in the media is a complex topic worthy of volumes of scholarship that simply could not be adequately addressed in these few pages of analysis.

Additionally, as most of Hollywood is run by the same select individuals and companies that could account for the lack of female variation, a further in-depth exploration of Hollywood/mainstream cinema industry norms and why it is so difficult to make changes in mainstream Hollywood would contribute to this conversation. Increasing the number of women in all avenues of film may not solve the problem of inadequate female representation and visibility if the power dynamics and gate keeping aspects do not shift with the influx. Also, a more in depth analysis into consumerism of the film industry and the superhero comic and film genre that promotes patriarchy would add to the investigation. Moreover, the reception of the films, genre, and comics from gender diverse audiences would gauge the degree of impact and absorption of postfeminism, sexism, objectification, and other patriarchal elements. This could be particularly interesting when in comparison with marketing/ promotional materials and recent superhero films with more active female characters and less stereotyping and voyeuristic scopophilia. This would aid in an understanding of why Hollywood, the comic genre, and other gate keeping or sexist elements still control the media's representation of women. This could also account for the responsibility of oppressive representations. Much of this impact is related to the debate of

whether media is depicting reality or creating an actualized reality – if the audiences dictate what they want to see or if the industry gate keepers dictate what is shown. The factors listed and more could account for the reproduction of the same sexist or postfeminist themes and female tropes.

It is also worth mentioning that although this analysis includes eight films, this series is only partially completed – assuming that Marvel Studios decides not to add any spin-off films. It is possible that representations of women may evolve into something more dimensional. At first, the women start off as cliché disempowered romantic stereotypes. Betty, the weakest and most feminized of all the women is the first representation, and slowly each introduced woman has more (pseudo or token) power, culminating in Peggy and Natasha as the last introduced and most empowered of the set. Although this phony empowerment is problematic, there, nonetheless, seems to be a loose attempt at correcting some of the empty and wooden female representations. If we examine Pepper's narrative throughout the Iron Man plotlines, we can begin to see perhaps the attempt at empowering women, albeit superficial. At first, Pepper begins as a weak woman, merely a personal assistant who seems to pine for Tony, but she concludes the plotline as a CEO and temporarily a superhero. That does not mean, though, that the series will not correct such lack luster representations in the face of audience feedback/ criticism that encourages such correction. The upcoming *Captain America: The Winter Solider* (2014) has no love interest, and Natasha plays a large active (platonic) role (Ryan, 2014). There have additionally been hints that the upcoming *The Avengers: The Age of Ultron* (2015) will feature Black Widow and her backstory as a major narrative device (Ryan, 2014). Clearly, it is worth revisiting this analysis at the completion of the series.

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APPENDIX:
THE MARVEL AVENGERS SERIES FILM DETAILS
FROM INTERNATIONAL MOVIE DATABASE AS OF MARCH 31st, 2014
(CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

Iron Man (2008)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Paramount Pictures

U.S. Release Date: May 2, 2008

Gross Box Office Income: \$585,174,222; \$318,412,101 USA

Screenwriters: Mark Fergus, Hawk Ostby, Art Marcum, Matt Holloway

Director: Jon Favreau

Main Cast: Robert Downey, Jr. (Tony Stark/Iron Man); Gwyneth Paltrow (Pepper Potts); Jeff Bridges (Obadiah Stane); Terrence Howard (Capt. James Rhodes); Paul Bettany (J.A.R.V.I.S.); Leslie Bibb (Christine Everhart)

“Tony Stark is the complete playboy who also happens to be an engineering genius. While in Afghanistan demonstrating a new missile, he's captured and wounded. His captors want him to assemble a missile for them but instead he creates an armored suit and a means to prevent his death from the shrapnel left in his chest by the attack. He uses the armored suit to escape. Back in the U.S. he announces his company will cease making weapons and he begins work on an updated armored suit only to find that Obadiah Stane, his second in command at Stark industries has been selling Stark weapons to the insurgents. He uses his new suit to return to Afghanistan to destroy the arms and then to stop Stane from misusing his research” (imdb.com).

Main Crossover Elements: S.H.I.E.L.D., Agent Paul Coulson, Director Nick Fury

The Incredible Hulk (2008)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Universal Studios

U.S. Release Date: June 13, 2008

Gross Box Office Income: \$263,427,551; \$134, 518, 390 USA

Screenwriter: Zak Penn

Director: Lawrence Leterrier

Main Cast: Edward Norton (Bruce Banner/ Incredible Hulk); Liv Tyler (Betty Ross); Tim Roth (Emil Blonsky/ Abomination); William Hurt (General Ross)

“A cure is in reach for the world's most primal force of fury: THE INCREDIBLE HULK. We find scientist Bruce Banner, living in shadows, scouring the planet for an antidote. But the warmongers who dream of abusing his powers won't leave him alone, nor will his need to be with the only woman he has ever loved, Betty Ross. Upon returning to civilization, our brilliant doctor is ruthlessly pursued by The Abomination -- a

nightmarish beast of pure adrenaline and aggression whose powers match The Hulk's own. A fight of comic-book proportions ensues as Banner must call upon the hero within to rescue New York City from total destruction. One scientist must make an agonizing final choice -- accept a peaceful life as Bruce Banner or the creature he could permanently become: THE INCREDIBLE HULK” (imdb.com).

Main Crossover Elements: S.H.I.E.L.D./ Tony Stark; Captain America location

Iron Man 2 (2010)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Paramount Pictures

U.S. Release Date: May 7, 2010

Gross Box Office Income: \$632,933,331 World Wide, \$314,433,331 USA

Screenwriter: Justin Thoreaux

Director: Jon Favreau

Main Cast: Robert Downey, Jr. (Tony Stark/Iron Man); Gwyneth Paltrow (Pepper Potts); Scarlett Johansson (Natasha Romanoff/ Black Widow); Mickey Rourke (Ivan Vanko/ Whiplash); Don Cheadle (Capt. James Rhodes); Sam Rockwell (Justin Hammer); Samuel L Jackson (Nick Fury); Paul Bettany (J.A.R.V.I.S.); Leslie Bibb (Christine Everhart); Jon Favreau (Happy Hogan)

“Now that Tony Stark has revealed to the world that he is Iron Man, the entire world is now eager to get their hands on his hot technology - whether it's the United States government, weapons contractors, or someone else. That someone else happens to be Ivan Vanko - the son of now deceased Anton Vanko, Howard Stark's former partner. Stark had Vanko banished to Russia for conspiring to commit treason against the US, and now Ivan wants revenge against Tony - and he's willing to get it at any cost. But after being humiliated in front of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, rival weapons contractor Justin Hammer sees Ivan as the key to upping his status against Stark Enterprises after an attack on the Monaco 500. But an ailing Tony has to figure out a way to save himself, get Vanko, and get Hammer before the government shows up and takes his beloved suits away” (imdb.com). Additionally, Pepper Potts is made CEO but struggles with her public image and responsibility, and Tony gets a new personal assistant, Natasha Romanoff, who is secretly a S.H.I.E.L.D agent sent to monitor him.

Main Crossover Elements: S.H.I.E.L.D./ Avengers Initiative; Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow

Thor (2011)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Paramount Pictures

U.S. Release Date: April 17, 2011

Gross Box Office Income: \$449,300,300 World Wide

Screenwriters: Ashely Edward Miller, Zack Stentz, Don Payne

Director: Kenneth Branagh

Main Cast: Chris Hemsworth (Thor); Natalie Portman (Jane Foster); Tom Hiddleston (Loki); Anthony Hopkins (Odin); Stellan Sarsgard (Eric Selvig); Renee Russo (Frigga); Kat Denning (Darcy Lewis); Clark Gregg (Phil Coulson); Jamie Alexander (Sif); Idris Elba (Heimdall)

“The reckless Thor (Chris Hemsworth) son of Odin (Anthony Hopkins), challenges his [father’s] claim to the throne of Asgard. To teach him humility, Odin casts the young warrior down to Earth to live among humans. Robbed of his powers, Thor falls in love with a scientist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman). While Thor's brother, Loki, usurps the throne of Asgard for evil gain and plans revenge, Thor's love for Jane and his lessons of humility turn him into the true hero and legendary warrior-defender of the peoples of the Earth, saving them from destruction” (imdb.com).

Main Crossover Elements: S.H.I.E.L.D./ Agent Coulson; Bruce Banner Disappearance

Captain American: The First Avenger (2011)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Paramount Pictures

U.S. Release Date: July 22, 2011

Gross Box Office Income: \$370,569,774; \$176,636,816 USA

Screenwriters: Christopher Markus, Stephen McFeely

Director: Joe Johnston

Main Cast: Chris Evans (Steve Rogers/ Captain America); Hailey Atwell (Peggy Carter); Hugo Weaving (Johann Schmidt/ Red Skull); Stanley Tucci (Abraham Erskine) Tommy Lee Jones (Chester Philips); Stan Sebastian (Bucky Barnes), Dominic Cooper (Howard Stark)

“During World War 2, Steve Rogers tries to enlist but is repeatedly rejected for his frail and sickly condition, however a scientist notes his determination and allows him to be accepted. What Steve doesn't know is that this scientist is in charge of a government project to create super soldiers, in which Steve is to be the first, but the colonel in charge of the project can't see what the scientist does in this scrawny runt - a strong inner character. Meanwhile, Johann Schmidt, head of a German science division known as HYDRA, knows this scientist and fears the success of his project in America. It could mean trouble for the Germans, so he sends a man to infiltrate and see if it's a success, and ‘take care’ of the scientist if it is. It is, and he does, but not without Steve and his new abilities chasing him down. Steve quickly becomes a mere U.S. war drive propaganda tool called ‘Captain America.’ During a rescue, he meets the diabolical Schmidt, and the two become each other's arch nemesis” (imdb.com). Additionally, in order to save the United States from utter destruction, Captain America crashes a Hydra plane carrying weapons of mass destructions into the Arctic Circle, putting him into a coma for 70 years. He is revived by S.H.I.E.L.D. in modern day.

Main Crossover Elements: Tesseract; S.H.I.E.L.D; Dr. Eric Selvig (*Thor*)

The Avengers (2012)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Buena Vista Home Entertainment

U.S. Release Date: May 4, 2012

Gross Box Office Income: \$1,511,757,910; \$623,279,547 USA

Screenwriter: Joss Whedon (Zac Penn, story)

Director: Joss Whedon

Main Cast: Robert Downey, Jr. (Tony Stark/Iron Man); Samuel L. Jackson (Nick Fury); Chris Evans (Steve Rogers/ Captain America); Chris Hemsworth (Thor); Mark Ruffalo (Bruce Banner/ Hulk); Scarlett Johansson (Natasha Romanoff/ Black Widow); Tom Hiddleston (Loki); Jeremy Renner (Clint Barton/ Hawkeye); Stella Sarsgaard (Eric Selvig); Colby Smulders (Maria Hill); Clark Gregg (Phil Coulson); Gwyneth Paltrow (Pepper Potts)

“S.H.I.E.L.D. has located the mysterious Tesseract device and the Army's super soldier Captain America. The Tesseract is actually a gateway to an entirely new world called Asgard. A mysterious being known as Loki arrives on earth and immediately assumes that he can rule all human beings. But that irks S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury the wrong way. As Loki escapes with the Tesseract, Nick Fury believes this is an act of war against Earth. His only hope is to assemble an actual team of super heroes. Dr. Bruce Banner, who turns into an enormous green rage monster known as the Hulk. Tony Stark and his venerable Iron Man armor. Captain America, the Stark Enterprises created super soldier. Thor, the god of thunder, protector of Earth and his home planet of Asgard, and Loki's brother. Master assassins Hawkeye and Natasha Romanoff. Together they will become a team to take on an attack that will call them to become the greatest of all time” (imdb.com).

Main Crossover Elements: Villain Loki (*Thor*); Tesseract (*Captain America: The First Avenger*); Hydra Weapons (*Captain America: The First Avenger*); Gamma Radiation (*The Incredible Hulk*)

Iron Man 3 (2013)

Studio: Marvel Studios and DMG Entertainment

Distributors: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

U.S. Release Date: May 3, 2013

Gross Box Office Income: \$1,214,692,272; \$408,992,272 USA

Screenwriters: Drew Pearce, Shane Black,

Director: Shane Black

Main Cast: Robert Downey, Jr. (Tony Stark/Iron Man); Gwyneth Paltrow (Pepper Potts); Don Cheadle (Capt. James Rhodes); Guy Pearce (Aldrich Killian); Rebecca Hall (Maya Hansen); Ben Kingsley (Mandarin/ Trevor); Paul Bettany (Jarvis); Jon Favreau (Happy Hogan)

“In Malibu California, Tony Stark has insomnia and over [sic] 72 hours he develops the new prototype MK42 of the Iron Man armature. He also recalls events in 1999, in Bern, Switzerland, when he had one night stand with the genetic scientist Maya Hansen that was researching a regenerative process and made fun of his fan Aldrich Killian on the New Year eve. There are explosions in Los Angeles and the terrorist Mandarin assumes the attempts broadcasting through television [sic]. When Tony's bodyguard and friend Happy Hogan is seriously wounded in an explosion, Tony Stark challenges Mandarin and gives his address to him. However, three helicopters attack his mansion and he loses everything but his prototype, and he awakes in the Tennessee. Tony tries to make work the defective prototype and soon he discovers that the event from 1999 is connected to the present terrorist attacks” (imdb.com). Additionally, Killian takes Pepper hostage and injects her with his Extremis serum, which is responsible for the terrorist attacks. When Tony cannot defeat Killian in their final showdown, Pepper, who was presumed dead, arises imbued with Extremis and kills Killian. Tony then destroys his Iron Man suits, removes Extremis from Pepper, and fixes his electromagnetic heart.

Main Crossover Elements: Events from *The Avengers*

Thor: The Dark World (2013)

Studio: Marvel Studios

Distributor: Disney

U.S. Release Date: November 8, 2013

Gross Box Office Income: \$644,783,140; \$206,360,018 USA

Screenwriters: Christopher Yost, Christopher Markus

Director: Alan Taylor

Actors: Chris Hemsworth (Thor); Natalie Portman (Jane Foster); Tom Hiddleston (Loki); Anthony Hopkins (Odin); Stellan Sarsgard (Eric Selvig); Renee Russo (Frigga); Christopher Eccleston (Malekith); Kat Denning (Darcy Lewis); Jamie Alexander (Sif); Idris Elba (Heimdall)

“Odin recalls when his father Bor and the warriors from Asgard vanquished the evil Dark Elves and their leader Malekith that wanted to send the universe into the darkness during the convergence of nine realms unleashing the powerful weapon Aether. Malekith escapes and Bor hides the Aether in-between two stone columns. In the present days, on Earth, the scientist Jane Foster that is waiting for the return of Thor, investigates a gravity phenomenon in an abandoned factory with her assistant and her intern. She finds the column where the Aether is hidden and the substance possesses her. In Asgard, Heimdall reports to Thor that Jane has disappeared. Thor returns to Earth and finds Jane; but when he sees that he has a strange energy protecting her, he brings Jane to Asgard to be healed. However, Malekith also awakes and goes to Asgard to retrieve the Aether. After a bloody battle, Frigga is murdered by Malekith and Thor proposes treason to his warrior friends of Asgard and teams up with Loki to seek revenge for the murder of their mother and to vanquish Malekith before he destroys Asgard with his Dark Elves” (imdb.com).

Main Crossover Elements: Events from *The Avengers*; Captain America Cameo