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INFINITY WARS: POST 9/11 SUPERHERO FILMS AND

AMERICAN EMPIRE

by

PETER J. BRUNO

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Infinity Wars: Post 9/11 Superhero Films and American Empire

by

Peter J. Bruno

Advisor: George Fragopoulos

In the last two decades, superhero films have accounted for some of the most popular and financially lucrative films of all time. This thesis analyzes some of the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of various superhero films following their post 9/11 boom. Beginning with America's response to the events of 9/11 and a subsequent retreat into a Manichean world of good versus evil, I introduce the term "empirical reality" in order to account for the ways daily American life is shielded from the worst effects of U.S. foreign policy. On screen this manifests by perpetuating the myth of the "clean war" through depictions of mass destruction without civilian casualties. Next, building on Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics," I introduce the term "digital Others" to assess for the ways these films' enemies are routinely digitized and dehumanized, rendered only to be killed. However, beyond the aesthetics of death, I investigate the narratives of post 9/11 superhero villains, often portrayed as aspiring conquerors bent on world domination. This imperial shadow, I argue, is simultaneously both a rejection and a projection of colonial guilt, with America imagining itself as the necropolitical target of its own policies. However, post 9/11 superhero films are also filled with ideological tensions. Occasionally, these films present critiques of institutions like the military industrial complex, but more often than not, such critiques often fall to the wayside by the end of the film. As a means to understand such contradictions, I turn to Mark

Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism" in order to trace how post 9/11 superhero films cannot imagine alternatives outside of empire and its capitalist hegemony. This thesis ends by examining two post 9/11 superhero films that come the closest towards refusing the status quo of empire.

Keywords: Superhero, Post 9/11, Capitalist realism, Empire, Imperialism, Necropolitics

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Fig. 1. Close-up on Spider-Man's eye focusing on the World Trade Center before apprehending criminals in between the twin towers. This sequence can be found in the original *Spider-Man* (2002) trailer, directed by Sam Raimi, but was removed shortly after 9/11.

Introduction: Every Superhero has an Origin Story

"The line between war and entertainment has always been permeable and negotiable, especially in a world saturated with electronic media...It may not be such a stretch to say that every representation of conflict must wrestle with the ethics of its own entertainment value." (4)

–   Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.*

"Hey Cap, how do we know the good guys from the bad guys?"

"If they're shooting at you, they're bad."

–   Captain America, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*

"I have successfully privatized world peace. What more do you want?"

–   Tony Stark, *Iron Man 2*

"Every superhero has an origin story," the advertisement boasts on repeat. It is late at night and I am sitting inside of a half-empty movie theater waiting for the 2019 film *Captain Marvel* to begin. The film has been out for a couple of weeks now, earning the ire of young men online skeptical of its so-called "feminist agenda." The ad returns once again, "Every superhero

has an origin story," the narrator proclaims. The music builds and crescendos, showcasing the flying skills of all women pilots as the narrator continues, "We all got our start somewhere. For us, it was the U.S. Air Force." While it is not completely out of the ordinary to see ads for branches of the military on television or in movie theaters, it *is* somewhat unusual to see the military referring to their own soldiers as superheroes. However, none of this is coincidental. In the film, Captain Marvel herself is a former U.S. Air Force pilot, and it is perhaps unsurprising that the U.S. Air Force has played a large part in the marketing and the production of the film, going as far as providing equipment in exchange for having the final say on the film's script, a practice that has become routine for militaristic Hollywood films (Braslow). As the popular veteran publication *Task and Purpose* remarks, "Captain Marvel is the recruiting tool of the U.S. Air Force's dreams" (Keller). But why is this exactly?

Upon first glance at the film, *Captain Marvel*'s ideology appears to come out against "the wars" and "the lies" of her former people (known as the Kree), disavowing those only interested in solidifying their own borders and killing off refugees once referred to as "terrorists" (*Captain Marvel*). Hardly positions seemingly associated with the U.S. Air Force. And yet, the film still operates functionally as a worthwhile investment for the military as a recruiting tool. These contradictions between funding and messaging are squared, in part, because of the United States' own self-image of itself as an empire against empires. In other words, Americans don't view themselves as being part of an empire, but rather, they view themselves as being part of a republic with a long history of fighting against imperialists and oppressors (Immerwahr 19). This means that *Captain Marvel*'s anti-colonial narrative actually fits directly in line with those of liberal humanist understandings of freedom and what scholar Lisa Lowe might refer to as, "the politics of our lack of knowledge," selectively affirming and forgetting the conditions by which freedom has been historically constituted (39). These are some of the sites of tension that I

explore further in my thesis, examining how post 9/11 superhero films might simultaneously both reinforce and occasionally subvert American empire and its capitalist hegemony amongst the backdrop of the amorphous and seemingly never-ending global "War on Terror."

As of 2019, superhero films have accounted for five of the top ten highest grossing films of all time, with more than 70 superhero films released since 9/11 (and still counting). Some have theorized that this post 9/11 boom reflects a reactionary tendency towards re-exerting the United States as a moral good against an imagined evil (Altheide 11; Laderman and Gruenewald 142; Hassler-Forest 28), while others emphasize narratives of American exceptionalism as coinciding with growing revolutions in computer technologies ("American Exceptionalism" 114). Certainly, there is room for both interpretations. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I am not so interested in speculating as to *why* the films themselves are so popular, but rather, I am much more interested in examining the films' sometimes contradictory ideological effects *because* they are so popular.

The first chapter begins by detailing one of America's modern origin stories, the attacks on 9/11 and the fostering of a simplistic Manichean worldview in response to the events, while detailing some of its direct effects on Hollywood. In considering 9/11 both as a literal tragedy and as an event experienced via television screens, I discuss the interruption of what I refer to as "empirical reality," or the sense of imperial normality that accompanies living inside of an empire, where its effects are rendered mostly invisible, unimaginable, and inconceivable to those inside of it, and how the effects of empire's reach remain largely outside of normal daily American life. This chapter details a few examples of how post 9/11 superhero films attempt to re-master the trauma of 9/11, while simultaneously fighting back against "evildoers."

Chapter two attempts to reckon with the ways that the destruction of cities and people are presented both aesthetically and ideologically in post 9/11 superhero films. In other words,

whose death matters, and why? While many post 9/11 superhero films imagine destruction on a massive scale, we seldom see the deaths of civilians displayed or implied on screen. This theme is explored further by examining the one film in particular that directly addresses the topic of civilian casualties: *Captain America: Civil War*.

The third chapter transitions from examining the destruction of cities and civilians to examining how enemies are manufactured and destroyed. More specifically, I utilize Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" as a way to map out the necropolitical imaginary of many post 9/11 superhero films. This necropolitical imaginary operates through the creation of what I refer to as "digital Others," or digital humanoid-like automatons outside of the category of human, most often utilized as a mechanism for dehumanizing subjects in order to render the violence done unto them cartoonish and ultimately necessary. This impulse, in conjunction with an inability to understand villians' motivations outside of an irrational quest for domination, I argue is both a projection and a rejection of colonial guilt, whereby America can only imagine itself as becoming the necropolitical target of its own policies.

The fourth chapter is grounded in Mark Fisher's concept of "capitalist realism" as a way to consider how post 9/11 superhero films cannot imagine an escape from empirical reality nor an alternative to its capitalist hegemony. However, while most post 9/11 superhero films are bound to capitalist realism, a surprising number of these films also present critiques of capitalism, the military industrial complex, and the status quo more generally. This chapter explores how systemic critiques (often levelled by the villains) are routinely subsumed by the narratives, ultimately ignored or forgotten about by the end of the films.

The final chapter of this thesis concludes with a consideration of two post 9/11 superhero films that manage to offer glimpses and gestures towards escaping both capitalist realism and empirical reality.

Since there is no way to distill more than 70 post 9/11 superhero films all into one paper, this thesis deals primarily with the extended universes of Marvel and DC, with a noticeable lack of discussion regarding the X-Men films alongside some of the one-off series and animated films. Future research in this area may want to consider interrogating the relationship between post 9/11 superhero films and the ways they reimagine, reanimate and reenact human history. Most notably, the ways in which superheroes are inserted into former international conflicts, and the ideological effects they produce as a result. Moreover, future research might also consider interrogating the reception of these films outside of exclusively American contexts.

Never Forgetting: 9/11 and the Interruption of Regularly Scheduled Programming

"Most Americans have probably experienced something like the loss of their First Worldism as a result of the events of September 11 and its aftermath. What kind of loss is this? It is the loss of the prerogative, only and always, to be the one who transgresses the sovereign boundaries of other states, but never to be in the position of having one's own boundaries transgressed. The United States was supposed to be the place that could not be attacked, where life was safe from the violence initiated from abroad, where the only violence we knew was the kind that we inflicted on ourselves. The violence that we inflict on others is only—and always—selectively brought into public view." (39)

– Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

"Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies...It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination." (344)

– The 9/11 Commission Report

"Nothing's been the same since New York."

– Tony Stark, *Iron Man 3*

One of the fundamental questions central to conceptualizing the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, is posed by Phillip Wegner in his book, *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001*, "Should we take this date as signaling a historical break and the inauguration of a new epoch in global history, or as part of an unbroken historical continuum?" (22). To a certain extent, the events now known simply as "9/11" present the ultimate paradox of sorts in American life, simultaneously appearing to have changed everything and nothing all at once (Fragopoulos and Naydan 8). The first large scale and successful foreign attack to seriously threaten the American mainland territory since the War of 1812, 9/11 played out as a sort of singularity on TV, one that allowed the United States to re-articulate its origin story as the ultimate victim, seemingly disconnected and outside of history or any sense of "blowback" against US foreign policy (*9-11* 11-2; Hassler-Forest 24-6; Sardar and Davies 29; Immerwahr 5-7, 382). Instead, what was presented to US audience citizens, was an attack without any

geopolitical context whatsoever, leading to the oft reiterated question, "Why do they hate us?" (Sardar and Davies 5). A question that president George W. Bush would provide an easy answer to: "They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other…America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world" (Sardar and Davies 137). But was this really the case?

This critical reading is not meant to downplay the tragedy of 9/11, nor to place blame on the victims, but rather, it is emphasized in order to understand 9/11 outside of the binarism established by George W. Bush and others, one that asserts you are either "with us or against us," and that any criticism of the United States is somehow aligned "with the terrorists" (*Precarious Life* 2, 15; McSweeney 5). These bad faith readings are perhaps unsurprising, as most Americans prefer to see the actions of the US government as uniquely selfless, benevolent, or even divinely inspired (Laderman and Gruenewald 5). Mainland Americans lack serious information regarding how US policies affect the world outside of its own borders, mostly unaware of the countries the US is currently bombing, both in full scale wars or shadow wars (Sardar and Davies 48; Edwards-Levy). Not to mention, the general public's lack of knowledge about what territories the United States controls (Immerwahr 13). With nearly 800 military bases in 70 different countries, the US consistently ranks highest globally in polls assessing for the greatest threat to world peace (Zeusse; Manevich and Chwe; Demko). Perhaps unsurprisingly, in another poll, Americans were even willing to bomb Agrabah, the fictional city from the Disney film *Aladdin* (Kasperkevic). In this vein, 9/11 was not only an attack on America, but it was also an attack on America's idea of itself as a benevolent and benign force for good in the world (Sardar and Davies 138). This contributes to what I am referring to as "empirical reality," the state of American consciousness within empire, the sense of imperial normality that comes with fighting

full scale wars that are both out of sight and out of mind, a daily life with exported violence completely out of view. Much like Daniel Immerwahr writes in his book, *How to Hide an Empire*, "Empire might be hard to make out from the mainland, but from the sites of colonial rule themselves, it is impossible to miss" (15). For America and much of the West writ large, empirical reality is not about what we do, but rather, it's about who believe ourselves to be (*Capitalist Realism* 146). However, what makes this so insidious, is that the US ultimately possesses the resources and power capable of refusing any form of self-reflection or self-criticism, possessing even the ability to veto almost any form of international accountability (Sardar and Davies 13, 56; *9-11* 84).

America's empirical reality was interrupted on 9/11, in part because of how the attack was primarily experienced and designed, as an event intended to be seen on television and the big screen. Whereas previous campaigns of terror (often perpetuated by states) were meant to hide the horrors they produced, the attacks on 9/11 were designed specifically in order to display its ultimate terror on screen, utilizing the very tools of the culture it sought to destroy (Boal et al. 26). As Douglas Kellner notes in *Cinema Wars*, spectacular terrorism exists, in part, to feed into a media diet that requires a spectacle in order to garner worldwide attention (99). While forms of media accelerate ever more rapidly, news cycles demand more and more extremes in order to break through and grab attention for any extended period of time. For most of the world, 9/11 was experienced primarily, first and foremost, as a live television event, none too different than the images of disaster films American audiences had grown so accustomed to consuming in the previous decades (*Welcome to the Desert* 12). Even some Hollywood directors expressed guilt and concern after the attacks, questioning their complicity in having potentially provided inspiration for the catastrophic events that unfolded (Kellner 100; McSweeney 6). Commenting on this uneasy anxiety surrounding the cultural zeitgeist of American destruction before and after

9/11, Roger Stahl writes in *Militainment, Inc.*, "The trauma cut both ways. For those on site, a common appraisal was that it was 'just like a movie'; those at home, on the other hand, felt compelled to visit ground zero to prove to themselves it was not" (9).

This paradoxical phenomenon of viewing 9/11 as both an absolute reality and an uncanny form of cinema is explored further in an essay and book by Slavoj Žižek titled, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. In these works, Žižek discusses the seeming impossibility and unbelievability of 9/11 to Americans, noting how the safe sphere of the First World had finally been shattered, with the entrance of the spectral violence so often exported into the Third World and elsewhere finally piercing our own social reality ("Welcome to the Desert" 71-2). However, rather than suggesting that America had embraced a full entrance into the Real, Žižek is careful to question the consequences of 9/11 in its aftermath:

> The US, which till now perceived itself as an island exempted from this kind of violence, witnessing this kind of thing only from the safe distance of the TV screen, is now directly involved. So the alternative is: will Americans decide to fortify further their "sphere," or to risk stepping out of it? Either America will persist in, strengthen even, the deeply immoral attitude of "Why should this happen to us? Things like this don't happen HERE!" leading to more aggression towards the threatening Outside, in short, to a paranoiac acting out. Or US-America will finally risk stepping through the fantasmic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival into the Real World, making the long-overdue move from "A thing like this should not happen HERE!" to "A thing like this should not happen ANYWHERE!" (76)

Unfortunately for Žižek (and all of us), almost 20 years after 9/11, it seems as if America has retreated further into the safe spectrality of empirical reality, the digital wars exported and

seldom witnessed by Americans, than it has in coming closer to realizing Žižek's optimistic provocation.

Part of the problem for assessing empirical reality for Americans in 9/11's immediate aftermath was how the US media presented the attacks, almost exclusively as an assault on Western culture and civilization, leaving out important contextual information about the Middle East in the process (Altheide 11-2). That is, instead of providing any background information about the area or about America's place historically in the international affairs of the region, the attacks were framed for viewers primarily as a battle between good vs. evil, the West vs. the cultural Others, the civilized vs. the barbarians (Altheide 16; Hassler-Forest 28). In fact, any media deemed too critical, or not sufficiently patriotic enough were routinely censored. US Attorney General Ashcroft even told Senate committees that critics of America's response to the attacks "aid terrorists" and undermine national unity (Altheide 17-9). Standing at ground zero, President Bush remarked, "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil" (Laderman and Gruenewald 2). Within this Manichean framework established as the fabric for interpreting social reality, there can be no reasoning with the enemy, as anything deemed purely evil can never be understood, it can only ever be eradicated and eliminated (Sardar and Davies 56).

While 9/11 enabled the United States to wage a new type of global "War on Terror" as a response to fight against the "Axis of Evil" and amorphous "evildoers," it is important not to exceptionalize 9/11 as the starting point for these types of policies. Rather, 9/11 accelerated the continuation of an already existing American empire, or as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it, 9/11 "created the kind of opportunities that World War Two offered, to refashion the world" (Boal et al. 80, 84, 93; Pilger 1). 9/11 authorized limitless aggression for the United States, providing misfortune and grief that could be yielded as a sort of "credit card" that could be used and renewed as a means to justify the continuous re-exertion of force without guilt

(*Precarious Life* 4; Baudrillard 48). However, these plans had already been set in motion for years within the neoconservative body apparatus of the military industrial complex. 9/11 merely accelerated the privatization of war and military operations, as think tanks like The Project for the New American Century had anticipated the US would likely require "a catalyzing event," something like a "new Pearl Harbor" in order to truly justify expanding its reach with any bit of popular support (*A Very Heavy Agenda*; Klein 379). For neoconservatives, 9/11 provided Americans with just that. However, as Judith Butler properly questions in her book *Precarious Life*, "Do we think that finding the individuals responsible for the attacks on the United States will constitute having gotten to the root?" (8). Of course not. Thus, the global "War on Terror" inevitably promises itself as permanent, with no end to potential threats in the foreseeable future. In light of this, what are we to make of a "War on Terror" that itself produces and exports more terror around the globe? In this system, perpetual warfare is normalized and made completely unexceptional, making any modern idea of "peace" profoundly relativized (Boal et al. 101; Linke and Smith 21). Good merely becomes the absence of evil. This is perhaps the defining ethos of post 9/11 America.

In manufacturing America's consent within empirical reality, the state plays an active role in regulating the visual modes of our perceptions of war, both in what is shown and what isn't. In her book, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler comments on this phenomenon, "The very action of the war, its practices and its effects, are meant to be established by the perspective that the Department of Defense orchestrates and permits, thereby illustrating the orchestrative power of the state to ratify what will be called reality: the extent of what is perceived to exist" (65-6). Beyond for instance, discouraging the display of coffins draped with American flags, or publishing the pictures of tortured Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, post 9/11 America featured a vast array of censorships, cancellations, re-writes and re-edits of

video games, television shows, and films (*Frames of War* 65, 72; McSweeney 3). This blending together of the state and Hollywood is detailed further in Matthew Alford's book, *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*. In the book, Alford details how Hollywood functions in conjunction with both concentrated corporate ownership and government agencies in order to create a sort of military media complex as a means to suppress any systemic critique of America (beyond milquetoast critiques of "bad apples" and corrupt individuals), while simultaneously fast-tracking films with nationalistic themes (4). Alford notes how our entertainment is almost always geared towards viewing the US as a benevolent actor in world affairs, with intervention portrayed as the only reasonable response presented against "bad actors" (3, 33). In this scathing work, Alford details the CIA's involvement in both explicit promotion and censorship in American films, and traces problematic connections, like the board of directors who share memberships in both Disney and Boeing (11, 26). Take for instance, in November 2001, members of the Bush administration met with more than forty top Hollywood executives. In the meeting, Karl Rove, Bush's chief political advisor, outlined several themes for films to follow or reflect: 1) the US campaign in Afghanistan was a war against terrorism and not Islam; 2) people can serve in the war effort and in their communities; 3) US troops and families should be supported; 4) 9/11 requires a global response; 5) this is a fight against evil, and 6) government and Hollywood are responsible for reassuring children that they will be safe (Alford 14).

A new generation of adults have now been born into a post 9/11 America, spending their entire lives with the US at war, while simultaneously, these wars are almost nowhere to be found in mass media or within normal American daily life. They merely become exported abstractions. To Americans, the wars on our movie screens are arguably more real than the ones overseas, with more discourse surrounding them, and with more power for ordinary citizens to affect their

outcomes. Enter the extended universes of post 9/11 superhero films. While not as obvious nor explicit as war films or action movies, post 9/11 superhero films reflect a vision of the world primarily informed by both the trauma of 9/11 and America's global "War on Terror." Serving primarily as allegories as opposed to direct representations, post 9/11 superhero films portray an America that only acts in self-defense from the ever present looming dangers and threats, often from outsiders with apocalyptic potentials, where heroes must do anything and everything necessary to save the world, including but not limited to establishing states of exception via mass surveillance and torture, as well as intervening in global conflicts and producing collateral damage and civilian casualties in the process.

Fascist Aesthetics: Wars without Blood

"This quadrant is unsafe. Please back away. We are here to help. This quadrant is unsafe. Please back away. We wish to avoid collateral damage and will inform you when this current conflict is resolved. We are here to help."

– Iron Legion, *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*

"To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh." (6)

– Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

Aesthetically, 9/11 also changed the ways the West imagined its own destruction. Whereas pre 9/11 films sometimes featured the destruction of skyscrapers, its destruction almost always featured a physics of collapse that now appears profoundly unreal and cartoonish in a post 9/11 world (beyond its dated CGI). Before 9/11, buildings in Hollywood blockbusters tended to maintain their shape intact, often breaking off sideways, and seemingly any slight force would send them collapsing. In post 9/11 films, we see shots reminiscent of news footage on 9/11, featuring billowing smoke, buildings that don't tumble so easily, and civilians framed in between buildings running. Perhaps *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* most vividly embodies the uncanny cinematic parallels to 9/11 eyewitness footage (see figure 2).

Fig. 2. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2006)*,* directed by Zack Snyder. Pictured here is Bruce Wayne (Batman) running towards a collapsing tower, as civilians run away.

As many have argued, superhero films allow audiences to relive the attacks on 9/11 as metaphorical in nature, but this time, with the crucial element of control inserted (Brown 65). This is perhaps most literally signified by a scene in *Superman Returns* (2006), when Superman single-handedly stops a plane from crashing into a baseball stadium (see figure 3).

Fig. 3. A scene in *Superman Returns* (2006), directed by Bryan Singer, where Superman uses his superhuman strength to prevent a plane from crashing into a baseball stadium, before placing it down onto the field safely.

Here, the viewer gets to experience both the vicarious terror of falling helplessly in a plane crash, while simultaneously identifying with, or at the very least, experiencing the power and safety of averting disaster. Yet, other superhero films present more widespread destruction analogous to 9/11, like in *The Avengers* (2012), *Man of Steel* (2013), and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). In fact, many have argued that *The Avengers* (2012) is an attempt to re-master the trauma of 9/11, with Stark Tower in New York operating as a stand in for the World Trade Center (Gruenewald 151, Riegler 110). Or, as Jeffrey Brown writes in his book, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, "Just as Rambo asked if he was 'allowed to win this time?' when considering returning to Vietnam, The Avengers demonstrate that through superheroes the nation is allowed to vicariously win 9/11 this time" (76).

Watch enough post 9/11 superhero films and you are bound to see "collateral damage" and wholesale destruction of persons and places that happen to find themselves in the unfortunate line of attack against the bad guys. However, seldom is the audience given contextual cues regarding who the heroes are actually fighting for. Instead, viewers are likely to notice an "empty city" sort of effect, where the inhabitants inside of the buildings are seemingly nowhere to be found. This I argue contributes to a perpetuating false belief in America's ability to fight "clean wars" with technological precision and without mistakes. That is, if the viewer feels sad about any of the deaths in a superhero film, it is almost always exclusively based on their personal relation to the hero, not for the cities and the civilians, the unknown and unimportant masses. By omission, this produces the effect on the viewer that everyone has been saved, when only the "bad guys" die, and when civilians are spared. No superhero film exemplifies this mythos quite so fervently as *Iron Man* (2008), where the main character, Tony Stark, utilizes special technology that enables him to target and kill only the terrorists, while the innocent civilians are spared (see figure 4).

Fig. 4. A first-person view from the inside of Iron Man's helmet in *Iron Man* (2008), directed by Jon Favreau. In this scene, Iron Man uses his advanced technology to identify the terrorists from

civilians, before firing bullets at the terrorists and killing them, saving all of the civilians in the process.

However, while a multitude of films imagine the collapse of wholescale cities pre and post 9/11, superhero films possess two unique qualities that separate their destruction from the others. The first being the superhero's extraordinary individual ability to prevent such a catastrophe. In no other genre does an individual character possess such extraordinary agency to prevent a building from collapsing, or to stop a nuclear bomb mid-air, for example. Its second unique quality lies in who or what is doing the destruction. In superhero films, it is not a catastrophic weather event, some alien force (unremoved from its connection to Earthlings), nor a giant monster that is terrorizing the city. Rather, in superhero films the source of destruction is orchestrated and led by another powerful individual or group of extraordinary individuals. Such societal collapse in superhero films is closer to warfare than to the calamity of a monster (and spectacular warfare at that). Furthermore, superhero films have not yet imagined the type of wholesale destruction that fosters a post-apocalyptic total reset for survival. In such post-apocalyptic films, the imagined futurity reigns supreme over the spectacular devastation, whereas within the superhero genre, mass destruction is continuously prevented as the "good guys" almost always win.

Yet, beyond personal imaginings, countless films present destruction with little to no acknowledgment of, nor implied deaths. In *The Avengers* (2012), an army wreaks havoc on New York, without any deaths implied nor shown; in *Man of Steel* (2013), a suburb and a city are torn apart, all with conveniently located occupants seemingly avoiding death; in *Iron Man 2* (2010), drones shoot bullets at a full convention center with no escapees struck; in *Batman Begins* (2005), a mostly empty monorail train is derailed without displaying death; in *The Dark Knight* (2008), a hospital is bombed without establishing the people inside of it; in *The Dark Knight*

Rises (2012), bridges collapse without cars falling off; in *Justice League* (2017), there is wholesale destruction without establishing any setting whatsoever. In fact, there are two separate superhero films where during the films there are no implied deaths, but instead, the deaths are only addressed in the follow-up sequel films. In *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), there is a brief interaction when they imply that during the previous installment, *Man of Steel* (2013), there were actually many people who died (however, during the film itself, there is only one death actually implied, when a man is seen praying inside of a building we assume is about to collapse). Similarly, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), the film quite literally goes out of its way to imply that the Avengers have evacuated and saved an entire city's worth of civilians, only to reveal later in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), that there were indeed many casualties during the film.

One of the only post 9/11 superhero films to address civilian casualties and "collateral damage," *Captain America: Civil War* begins with a brief conflict that ends in one of the Avengers, Wanda Maximoff, saving Captain America by deflecting an explosion upwards into a building, killing a group of eight Wakandan civilians (from the fictional African nation of Wakanda) in the process. This event becomes a jumping off point for the film, as the plot centers around an attempt to deal with the Avengers' unaccountable interventions and their ensuing collateral damage as a result. Following this scene featuring the death of eight civilians, one of the victims' parents berates Tony Stark (Iron Man), for his supposed involvement in her child's death, and for the lack of accountability and justice given to her child's death. Following this thread later in the film, the cause has moved global, with 117 countries ready to sign an agreement with the United Nations that would force oversight, regulations, and accountability onto the Avengers' sovereignty as the world's foremost interventionist superheroes. All of this is after we learn that what was once viewed as a heroic act in the previous film, *Avengers: Age of*

Ultron, was actually a destructive event that lead to the deaths of countless Sokovian civilians (a fictional Eastern country). However, the agreement causes the Avengers to fracture and split between those who are for the agreement (led by Tony Stark/Iron Man) and those who are against it (led by Steve Rogers/Captain America). The on-screen debate between the characters unfolds like this:

> STARK. Oh, that's Charles Spencer, by the way. He's a great kid. Computer engineering degree. 3.6 GPA. Had a floor-level gig. Intel plan for the Fall. But first he wanted to put a few miles on his soul. See the world. Maybe be of service. Charlie didn't want to go to Vegas or Fort Lauderdale, which is what I would do. He didn't go to Paris or Amsterdam, which sounds fun. He decided to spend his summer building sustainable housing for the poor. Guess where? Sokovia. He wanted to make a difference, I suppose. I mean, we won't know because we dropped a building on him while we were kicking ass. There's no decision-making process here. We need to be put in check! Whatever form that takes, I'm game. If we can't accept limitations, we're boundaryless. We're no better than the bad guys.

> CAPTAIN. Tony, someone dies on your watch, you don't give up.

> STARK. Who said we're giving up?

> CAPTAIN. We are, for not taking responsibility for our actions. This document just shifts the blame.

> RHODY (another hero chimes in). Sorry, Steve. That is dangerously arrogant. This is the United Nations we're talking about. It's not The World Security Council. It's not SHIELD. It's not HYDRA (Both fictional groups in the series).

> CAPTAIN. I know. But it's run by people with agendas and agendas change.

STARK. That's good. That's why I'm here. When I realized what my weapons were

capable of in the wrong hands, I shut it down; stop manufacturing.

CAPTAIN. Tony. You chose to do that. If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose.

What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there's

somewhere we need to go and they don't let us? We may not be perfect but the safest

sands are still our own (*Captain America: Civil War*).

Perhaps this interaction is the defining moment for the modern take on Captain America. In true

neoconservative fashion, Captain America must never give up his right to choose, especially if

that choice is for potential, unforeseen military intervention. After all, who has the right to

question America's foreign policy? Certainly not when it is presented from the viewpoint of

saving others, doing good, or for "defense" and "security" ("Captain America's Empire" 630).

The film gets even messier when a terrorist attack kills Black Panther/T'Challa's father

when they are going to sign the U.N.'s agreement (perhaps a subtle way to imply that diplomacy

is too idealistic). After T'Challa hunts down the falsely accused Bucky (one of Captain

America's friends), a variety of personal conflicts unfold until we discover the true terrorist was

Baron Zemo, a citizen from Sokovia, the city destroyed by the Avengers in the previous film.

The confrontation emerges:

CAPTAIN. You're Sokovian, is that what this is about?

ZEMO. Sokovia was a failed state long before you blew it to Hell. No. I am here because

I made a promise.

CAPTAIN. You lost someone.

ZEMO. I lost everyone. And so will you. An empire toppled by its enemies can rise

again. But one which crumbles from within? That's dead. Forever (*Captain America:*

Civil War).

After a personal conflict unfolds between Iron Man and Captain America (unrelated to the agreement), Black Panther (T'Challa) confronts Zemo, who killed his father:

T'CHALLA. You almost killed the wrong man.

ZEMO. Hardly an innocent one.

T'CHALLA. Is this all you wanted? To see them rip each other apart?

ZEMO. My father left outside the city. I thought we would be safe there. My son was excited. He could see the Iron Man from the car window. I told my wife, "Don't worry, they're fighting in the city. We are miles from harm." Then the dust cleared and the screaming stopped. It took me two days until I found their bodies. My father, still holding my wife and son in his arms. And the Avengers? They went home. I knew I couldn't kill them, more powerful men than me have tried. But if I could get them to kill each other…I'm sorry about your father. He seemed a good man with a beautiful son."

T'CHALLA. Vengeance has consumed you. It is consuming them. I am done letting it consume me. Justice will come soon enough."

ZEMO. Tell that to the dead" (reaches to shoot himself in the head).

T'CHALLA. (Stops Zemo from killing himself) The living are not done with you yet.

There is a lot happening here. We have a villain whose family and city have been killed by the Avengers, and who explicitly references the Avengers working on the behalf of "empire." In the beginning of this exchange, Captain America can only view Zemo's revenge from the lens of personal loss, not ideology. Zemo then clearly articulates that he cannot take down the empire nor the Avengers on his own, but rather, that they can only be dismantled from within. And finally, T'Challa is the only person who can break the cycle of violence, albeit to bring Zemo to "justice" (presumably in the form of carceral punishment). What is so remarkable about this scene is the asymmetry of power operating in full service towards the ends of American

exceptionalism and empire as something that can never be questioned or envisioned without. First, much to the delight of Captain America, Zemo's intentions are presented as being for personal ends rather than ideological ones, as Zemo is quick to distance himself from the "failed state" of Sokovia (perhaps serving as some sly stand-in for a fictionalized failing communist state). Second, Zemo presents himself as initially happy to have seen the Avengers and their initial intervention, but only finds himself outraged when it impacts him and his family personally. This allows for the benevolent empire to, like Wanda's previous "accident" killing Wakandan civilians, apologize for making a "mistake" in the service of trying to do good (mainly, on the behalf of "saving" others). In other words, when the United States commits acts of violence or atrocities, they are given the benefit of the doubt as acting in the service of "human rights." Much like how statistics on civilian casualties are notoriously difficult to assess in regards to the United States' drone program and its wars overseas, the United States is given a monopoly on what counts as legitimate violence ("The New War" 31). As Judith Butler observes, "We castigate ourselves for not aiming better, as if the end goal is to aim right. We do not, however, take the sign of destroyed life and decimated peoples as something for which we are responsible, or indeed understand how that decimation works to confirm the United States as performing atrocities. Our own acts are not considered terrorist" (*Precarious Life* 6).

The scene and the film itself ends without questioning empire, but rather, it is Zemo who will be brought to justice, because it is he who meant to kill someone with a conscious intent, rather than killing someone by accident in the service of fulfilling some greater good. Not to mention, it was against the interests of empire. American audiences can only empathize with Zemo insofar as we can relate to his own personal loss, as we must "never forget" 9/11. But American audiences cannot imagine another country occupying our own, nor making "mistakes" that end in the destruction of cities and families. In America's case, we are able to use 9/11 in

order to justify intervention wherever and whenever necessary. However, for Zemo, he is not afforded the same luxury in doing the same for his country. By the end of the film, the Avengers' benevolent intentions ultimately win out, with the reluctant but always justified American interventions left intact and remaining largely as an unquestioned premise.

On Superheroes and Subhumans: Digital Others and the Necropolitical Imagination

"In the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension." (24)

– Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics"

"The concept of Empire is presented as a global concert under the direction of a single conductor, a unitary power that maintains the social peace and produces its ethical truths. And in order to achieve these ends, the single power is given the necessary force to conduct, when necessary, 'just wars' at the borders against the barbarians and internally against the rebellious." (10)

– Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*

"Your politics bore me."

– Thanos, *Guardians of the Galaxy*

After considering the destruction of cityscapes and visions of a "clean war" without civilian casualties, this chapter will focus on the existential threats posed in post 9/11 superhero films and the enemies they manufacture. In this chapter, I analyze the depersonalizing aesthetics of post 9/11 superhero films as the mechanism necessary for justifying the destruction of Others as something that is not only meant to be entertaining, but also fun. This is made possible, in part, by utilizing a strategy I am referring to as the creation of "digital Others," or the process by which Others are digitized, dehumanized, and cloned, at once rendered human and inhuman simultaneously. Through this process, I argue that post 9/11 superhero films both create and destroy digital Others in the service of upholding American empire and its capitalist hegemony, defending Western civilization from the globalized forces of imagined evil. Reflecting a larger colonial unconscious, I suggest that we read the post 9/11 superhero villain as America's imperial shadow, its simultaneous projection and rejection of colonial guilt, imagining itself as the necropolitical target of its own policies.

If anything unites the ever-expanding post 9/11 superhero films together, it is through the cliched narrative arc that follows a villain's quest for power, and a hero's response to that threat. Superheroes are seldom proactive, but rather, are always responding to evil, however that evil is defined. Much like how the U.S. positions its own militarism as wholly defensive, superheroes are never waging pre-emptive offensive interventions, but instead, violence always originates with the enemy (Linke & Smith 3; Muzzatti 4). In this vein, superheroes, like American empire, operate as the world police, only ever fashioning themselves as using violence as a tool for peace and justice. This is no coincidence, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss in their book *Empire*, police action is the lens by which "just wars" are made possible:

> On the one hand, war is reduced to the status of police action, and on the other, the new power that can legitimately exercise ethical functions through war is sacralized…It has become an activity that is justified in itself. Two distinct elements are combined in this concept of just war: first, the legitimacy of the military apparatus insofar as it is ethically grounded, and second, the effectiveness of military action to achieve the desired order and peace (12-3).

In other words, superheroes and American empire writ large, are viewed as good insofar as they are deemed effective and ethically grounded. However, 9/11 and the subsequent global "War on Terror" established a state of exception whereby the ends ultimately justified the means. Perhaps most visibly, through outsourcing torture and indefinite detainment at Guantanamo Bay (Immerwahr 388-9). Post 9/11 superhero films are profoundly cynical, so much so that even Zack Snyder, director of multiple post 9/11 superhero films has responded to fans' idealism:

> It's a cool point of view to be like, "My heroes are still innocent. My heroes didn't fucking lie to America. My heroes didn't embezzle money from their corporations. My heroes didn't commit any atrocities." That's cool. But you're living in a fucking dream

world. (Abad-Santos)

Snyder's cynicism perhaps best crystallizes the distinction between pre and post 9/11 superheroes. Whereas pre 9/11 superhero films reflected a certain moral clarity in regards to its heroes, post 9/11 superhero films operate under the state of exception. That is, post 9/11 superheroes live in the world of the Patriot Act and Guantanamo Bay, where rights and laws can be suspended indefinitely in service of security against any threat deemed too dangerous. In the global "War on Terror," this state of exception is made permanent (Agamben 2-7). This is perhaps most vividly displayed in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), when Batman utilizes technology as a mechanism to spy on every citizen in Gotham, and resorts to torturing the Joker in order to save those in trouble. However, torture is not exclusive to Batman in *The Dark Knight*, but rather, torture is a theme that continuously re-emerges in post 9/11 superhero films and that has almost become a trope of sorts, often reinforcing the false perception that torture yields correct information in the process. Moreover, the post 9/11 superhero film reinforces the idea that danger is always lurking around the corner, but rather than promising us a better positive future to believe in, our cynical heroes, like our politicians, can only promise to protect us from ever growing nightmares (*The Power of Nightmares*).

Important to this consideration of empire and its relationship to superhero films as American corporate commodities consumed worldwide is to consider how the United States projects its influence across the globe. Or, as Daniel Immerwahr argues, that colonization has been replaced by globalization in its exercise of American power (18). These films produce ideological effects, and in some ways, serve as a form of "soft power" for empire. As mentioned in the previous chapter regarding the funding of these films, it might be helpful to look towards Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "propaganda model" in order to better understand how

this phenomenon works. In their book, *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky discuss the role of mass media:

> The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interests, to fulfill this role requires systemic propaganda. (1)

In some ways, the understanding of the mass media as an apparatus that only reflects a vision of the world acceptable to its corporate funders is not something new or novel. However, whereas Herman and Chomsky applied this insight to the news media, this concept should also be applied to the realm of fantasy and artistic production within empire. As postcolonial scholar Edward Said reminds us, empire creates a tautology of representation whereby its own power is reconstituted and confirmed by the very power it has to represent itself and others. Writing about this phenomenon, Said notes, "All cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way control them. Yet not all cultures make representations of foreign cultures *and* in fact master or control them" (100). This is vitally important towards understanding whose death matters in these stories, and why?

In the context of the U.S.'s seemingly endless "War on Terror," it is important to interrogate the mechanisms by which violence is rendered as an acceptable and necessary practice in order to combat "terror." As discussed in the previous chapter, the enemies (like Baron Zemo) presented in post 9/11 superhero films often appear to be motivated outside of the realm of ideology, operating instead on behalf of avenging a past personal trauma, or worse, they are simply motivated by an inner "evil," perhaps a byproduct of their corrupted nature or being. However, what is apparent regardless of representation and the degree to which the villain is

humanized, dehumanized, or Orientalized, is that the enemy cannot be reasoned with, but only

dealt with by force. Like America's response to 9/11, and like Hollywood under Karl Rove's

direction, the Western world was reduced to that of a binary Manichean vision, a battle between

good vs. evil. However, none of this is particularly new. As revolutionary thinker Franz Fanon

writes,

> The colonial world is a Manichean world. The colonist is not content with physically
>
> limiting the space of the colonized, i.e., with the help of his agents of law and order. As if
>
> to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation, the colonist turns the colonized
>
> into a kind of quintessence of evil. Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society
>
> without values. The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost
>
> its values or worse never possessed any. The "native" is declared impervious to ethics,
>
> representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. In other
>
> words, absolute evil. A corrosive element, destroying everything within his reach, a
>
> corrupting element, distorting everything which involves aesthetics or morals, an agent of
>
> malevolent powers, and unconscious and incurable instrument of blind
>
> forces...Sometimes this Manichaeism reaches its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the
>
> colonized subject. In plain talk, he is reduced to the state of an animal. (6-7)

In other words, this Manichean vision is not an entirely new phenomenon altogether, but rather,

is a re-articulation of an older colonial mindset necessary for justifying modern imperialism.

That is, the production of the Western self is constructed through the simultaneous production

and reproduction of alterity and essentialized otherness (Hardt and Negri 129; Allen 478; Yancy

9). Describing this phenomenon in detail, Hardt and Negri write,

> The colonized subject is constructed in the metropolitan imaginary as other, and thus, as
>
> far as possible, the colonized is cast outside the defining bases of European civilized

values. (We can't reason with them; they cannot control themselves; they don't respect the value of human life; they only understand violence)...Only through opposition to the colonized does the metropolitan subject really become itself. What first appeared as a simple logic of exclusion, then, turns out to be a negative dialectic of recognition. The colonizer does produce the colonized as negation, but, through a dialectical twist, that negative colonized identity is negated in turn to found the positive colonizer Self. (124-8)

Thus, the production of "the superhuman" and "the subhuman" are mutually constitutive (Allen 480). And like the simple but profound equation Aimé Césaire asserts, "colonization=thingification" (42). However, beyond disidentification and the production of Otherness, Hardt and Negri are careful to remind us that this very difference itself is reified through violence, stating,

colonialism and colonialist representations are grounded in a violent struggle that must be continuously renewed. The European Self needs violence and needs to confront its Other to feel and maintain its power, to remake itself continually. The generalized state of war that continuously subtends colonial representations is not accidental or even unwanted—violence is the necessary foundation of colonialism itself. (129)

In this way, 9/11 (and its re-articulations both real and allegorical) allow the U.S. to refashion and reassert the distinctions between "us" and "them," securing a civilized inside from an uncivilized and threatening outside (Linke and Smith 7; Allen 478).

However, in order to maintain war as a permanent condition, a certain level of distancing is required. Thus, dehumanization serves to render and transform our violence into "justice" (Muzzatti 18). As John Tirman argues in his book *The Death of Others*, the U.S. mourns Americans, not its victims (3). If the U.S. cannot even be bothered to keep detailed records of

civilian casualties in the real wars we fight, why would we expect to see the deaths of Others in our films presented as something that is important and that viewers should care about?

Superhero films, most often rated PG-13 or below, provide a cartoonish view of violence, with most not even depicting blood on screen. The presence of violence in these films is often meant to be seen as entertaining and fun, consumed as passively as one might eat a cookie, enjoying its fleeting pleasure, reaching for another, without ever really thinking about the conditions of its production, nor the consequences of consuming it (*Against Interpretation* 277; Muzzatti 5). In essence, the films allow the viewer to engage in what Susan Sontag refers to as, "the acceptable fantasy of cruelty" (215). This is done, in part, through the creation of humanoid like digital enemies with features that simultaneously cannot be recognized yet must be made recognizable (*Welcome to the Desert* 138). The Others must be as unrecognizable as their motivations, just like the absence of context for the U.S.'s wars. As Alfred reminds us in *The Dark Knight*, "Some men just want to watch the world burn," suggesting a world in which the kind of violence committed by people such as the Joker is both apolitical and removed from any true political motivations.

In derealizing death, post 9/11 superhero films utilize vast CGI technologies in order to manufacture artificial life, creating digital Others excluded from the category of human with the sole purpose of being exterminated by our heroes. Film after film produces non-human enemies rendered as undifferentiated masses that cannot be reasoned with, and in fact, like zombies, will only kill you if given the chance. Some notable examples: in *Thor* (2011) the frost giants must be defeated, but one must also be careful not to let them contaminate and destroy you in the process; in the follow-up film, *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) there are dark elves bent on colonizing the planet and installing dark forces who must be eradicated; in *The Avengers* (2012) there is an alien army literally provided by "The Other" attempting to enslave humanity; in *Justice League*

(2017) there is both a CGI villain and an army of insect people with wings hoping to terraform the earth in the image of their homeland; in *Aquaman* (2018) there are near faceless underwater soldiers and a sleuth of creatures to be destroyed; in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame (2019)* there are CGI villains and an army of human-like "space dogs" who operate in service of the genocidal villain, Thanos. However, what unites these characters is not their CGI nature, but rather, their disposability, and for lack of a better word, zombification. As zombified characters, they never achieve the status of a full, living and breathing human (Linnemann & Wall & Green, 507). However, digital Others are *not* zombies. Digital Others are not undead in the sense that they have never gained the status of being recognized as fully alive and human, or as Judith Butler might put it, they have never gained the status of possessing a "livable life" nor a "grievable death" (146-7). Functioning as automatons excluded from the category of human, these indistinct characters operate effectively as "its," without personal characteristics, emotions, or voices (Bishop 141; *Against Interpretation* 221). Digital Others are rendered as "sub-subaltern," completely outside of discourse and without opinion nor consciousness (Bishop 146). This embodiment is perhaps most recognizable in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), when the villain's army of indiscernible creatures, half-humanoid and half-animal without eyes, continue charging towards an electric shield with such vigor as to rip themselves apart in trying to cross the border in the process. These digital Others are so profoundly inhuman that they will not only risk their own bodily harm to cross the shield, but they will literally kill themselves just to get the chance to kill you.

In viewing the relationship of post 9/11 superheroes as an ipso-facto private extension of the state, I turn to theorist Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" to help illuminate the destruction of digital Others. In defining necropolitics, Mbembe writes, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live

and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes" (11-12). If similarly, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, that human rights and the very notion of "the human" is always conditional and in relation to the nation-state, then necropolitics operates under continuous appeals to states of emergency and states of exception in order to exercise its power over death (Agamben 126; Mbembe 16; Valencia 210). Moreover, the very existence of Others can be used as a means to create a state of exception, as Mbembe writes, "The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security — this, I suggest, is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself" (18). Much like how the U.S. will not "negotiate with terrorists," neither will superheroes. Curiously enough, while superheroes do kill these digital Others, they almost never resort to killing the villains or the figureheads for these armies. Still, these non-humans become disposable in service of bringing the villain to justice. In fact, this exception for leaders remains entirely consistent with Mbembe's vision of necropolitics, as

> a legitimate war is, to a large extent, a war conducted by one state against another or, more precisely, a war between "civilized" states...In the same context, colonies are similar to frontiers. They are inhabited by "savages." The colonies are not organized in a state form and have not created a human world. Their armies do not form a distinct entity, and their wars are not wars between regular armies. They do not imply the mobilization of sovereign subjects (citizens) who respect each other as enemies. They do not establish a distinction between combatants and noncombatants, or again between an "enemy" and a "criminal." It it thus impossible to conclude peace with them. (24)

Beyond sovereign nation states themselves, it is the superheroes who possess the ultimate power of defining who is not only disposable or not, but also, who is human or not. Thus, for viewers,

the killing of digital Others does not register as significant insofar as it establishes the health and safety for the heroes. Quoting and expanding upon Hannah Arendt's book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Mbembe continues,

> In the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension. In fact, according to Arendt, what makes the savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature...the savages are, as it were, "natural" human beings who lack the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, "so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder." (24, Mbembe quoting Hannah Arendt)

Not only are digital Others reduced to a status of "bare life," but post 9/11 superhero films, more often than not, are exerting theories of human nature. In essence, that some people are inherently good, some people are inherently bad, but everyone is corruptible (however, not everyone will be held accountable, nor given the chance at redemption).

If peace is more likely to assume the shape of a war without end in the exercise of sovereignty outside of the law, then how might the very embodiment of the continuous production of superhero films reflect America's seemingly endless global "War on Terror?" Certainly, *Avengers: Infinity War* becomes an apt title in describing this phenomenon. Yet, beyond this notion itself lies a strange and inadvertent undertone in recent memory. That is, in the past few years, at least four superhero films have presented villains interested in global domination over Western civilization, *Justice League* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)*, and Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Whereas in years past, films like *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) possessed themes of overthrowing Western civilization via Orientalist stand-ins for Islamic terrorists, these films were first and foremost

concerned with destruction in the form of bleak nihilism. However, in *Justice League*, *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War,* and *Avengers: Endgame,* the villains are all interested in exerting their own dominion over the West, not in simply destroying it. In *Justice League,* an old god named Steppenwolf wants to recreate Earth in the image of his home-world; in *Black Panther*, Killmonger wants to reverse the poles of Western colonialism, by in return, colonizing it on behalf of the (fake) African nation of Wakanda; and in both *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame,* Thanos wants to destroy half of the population in service of a sort of austerity politics meant to conserve resources sustainably. However, the only film where the villain succeeds in their mission is in *Avengers: Infinity War,* where half of the population is digitally disappeared by Thanos.

In all of these films, the villains are presented as profoundly disturbed, irrational and genocidal. Yet, lurking underneath the surface of these narratives, I argue, is a deep seated Janus-faced imperial shadow, whereby colonial guilt and the refusal for imperial wrongdoing is projected. In other words, the villains cannot and must not be understood as rational actors by both the superheroes and the audience, as in order to do so, these films would have to implicate the United States and its position in history. Much like how 9/11 is read divorced outside of any historical context, America is somehow always at the behest of irrational criminals and maniacs who could destroy us at any moment in time, and for seemingly no reason at all. In presenting Goliath as David, these films represent an indirect admission for "why *they* hate *us*." That is, these films portray an empire that can only imagine and fear that what it is doing and has done to Others, will one day be turned against its own interests and be done unto itself. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the conclusions to *Avengers: Infinity War* and its follow-up, *Avengers: Endgame*. Whereas in *Infinity War*, the villain wins, eliminating half of the universe's population in the process, in *Endgame*, this process is reversed, with our heroes erasing Thanos

and his army. Put differently, the guiding ethos of these two films put together is, "If we don't disappear them, they will disappear us." Thus, the Other's degeneracy becomes the means by which conquest is justified (Bhaba 101), or as as Aimé Césaire writes,

> Colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitability tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal. (41)

Capitalist Realism and the Commodification of Critique

"What do you have against capitalism?"

   – Johnny Storm, *The Fantastic Four*

"All you care about is money."

   – Joker, *The Dark Knight*

"This is a stock exchange, there's no money you could steal!"

"Really? Then why are you people here?"

   – Bane, *The Dark Knight Rises*

"It's okay, we're Americans."

"Is that supposed to make them like us?"

   – Jane Foster, *Thor: The Dark World*

"Mission accomplished...in a George Bush sort of way."

   – Deadpool, *Deadpool 2*

In Mark Fisher's 2009 book titled, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Fisher meditates on a phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (2). Fisher remarks, the "slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). In essence, capitalist realism is the symbolic language of the modern superhero franchise. That is, if capitalism requires endless crises of boom and bust cycles, then time after time, after stability has been preserved and the crisis has been averted (let's say, the bad guy has lost in one film), there will always be a new villain in a new film to be thwarted again, over and over in order to preserve the status quo ad infinitum (Hassler-Forest 212). This repetition allows for further symbolic obfuscation, as we are only ever able to understand these crises through the lens of individual actors, rational and irrational, heroes and villains, but never as the result of how systems function and are structured. This chapter will

focus on some of the critiques that post 9/11 superhero films wedge against the status quo, and how more often than not, these critiques find themselves absorbed by the ultimate narrative arc, bound by capitalist realism and empire.

Much like how *Captain America: Civil War* presented a vague critique against civilian casualties, post 9/11 superhero films occasionally present institutional critiques, but seldom present alternatives without senseless violence. If they do present critiques, the critiques often become forgotten, disregarded, or subsumed within the narrative like a sublimated catharsis, leaving behind the same status quo presented in the beginning of the film left largely intact by the end of the film. For instance, Marvel's *Ant-Man* might not even exist if the protagonist were able to find steady employment after being released from prison and subsequently fired from low-paying, unfulfilling service jobs for his criminal record. Yet, what is most fascinating about the critiques presented in these films is how they present "the now" as something that is not necessarily ideal and good, but rather, how they present any alternatives to disrupting the status quo as demonstrably worse. In this way, post 9/11 superhero films embody what Fisher describes as "reflexive impotence," or as he defines it, "They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it. But that 'knowledge', that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy" (21). In other words, the audience, and in some sense, even the writers know that our institutions are failing, but the audience members are certainly in no position to effect change, they are not superheroes with tremendous individual abilities. The audience understands that they possess little to no power as atomized subjects capable of directly impacting our neoliberal democracy. If anything, post 9/11 superhero films reflect the failures of our institutions to hold power accountable. The superhero is the ultimate individualist and prototypical neoliberal subject, living up to Uncle

Ben's advice to Spider-Man, that "With great power comes great responsibility" (*Spider-Man*).

However, for most Americans, without great power comes great responsibilization.

  Institutional critiques are often leveled by the villains of the stories, not the protagonists.
One of the more absurd examples of this appears during *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), when
the working class villain (Adrian Toomes), who is introduced in the beginning of the film as a
worker being laid off from his job at the hands of uncaring state bureaucrats, remarks to Spider-
Man (Peter Parker) during a confrontation,

> TOOMES. Peter, you're young. You don't understand how the world works.
>
> PARKER. Yeah, but I understand that selling weapons to criminals is wrong!
>
> TOOMES. How do you think your buddy Stark paid for that tower, or any of his little
> toys? Those people, Pete, those people up there, the rich and the powerful, they do
> whatever they want. Guys like us, like you and me...they don't care about us. We build
> their roads and we fight all their wars and everything. They don't care about us. We have
> to pick up after them. We have to eat their table scraps. That's how it is. I know you know
> what I'm talking about, Peter.
>
> PARKER. Why are you telling me this?
>
> TOOMES. Cause I want you to understand. And I needed a little time to get her airborne
> (*Spiderman: Homecoming*).

Here, Toomes' critique was only stated as a cynical ploy for him to buy time, in order to get his
weapon ready to be used against Spider-Man. In other words, as far as the narrative is concerned,
it's not like he *really* believes what he is saying. In this back and forth, Spider-Man's nemesis
clearly articulates a working class truth, that the workers and their labor are exploited and that it
is *their* bodies who are left to suffer within the current system. Toomes points out that it is "us"
who ultimately fight and die in wars waged on behalf of the rich, while criticizing Parker's

funder, Tony Stark, who has become rich in part due to weapons manufacturing. However, just as soon as he states his case, he must quickly and literally fly away from any critique of the status quo, never to return to it again. The villain's critique ultimately rings shallow, as he himself desires nothing but acquiring more money by any means necessary throughout the film.

Similarly shallow, the Iron Man films depict a weapons manufacturer, Tony Stark, who has a change of heart about the capabilities of his weapons only after it has affected him personally, after he is taken hostage by Middle Eastern terrorists (insert whatever group American audiences read them as at the moment). However, our presence in Afghanistan in the first place is never questioned, it is fully assumed, normalized and taken for granted. Yet, in a slightly subversive fashion, we learn that the Middle Eastern Others are *actually* fronted and run by American businessmen in both the *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* films. In the first *Iron Man*, it is Stark's business partner Obadiah Stane, who cannot allow for Stark to convert the company into a sustainable energy based enterprise rather than a weapons manufacturer, and who is secretly selling weapons to any and all buyers behind the scenes, regardless of outcome. On the surface, this appears like it is a critique of the military industrial complex, or even the U.S.'s role in arming the Mujahideen and in some ways, it is (Immerwahr 374). However, American empire is never actually questioned here, as Tony Stark himself states, that we need to get the weapons out of the hands of the "bad guys" and into the hands of the "good guys," presumably into the hands of the U.S. military. Moreover, the entire idea of weapons manufacturers gets obfuscated and placed into the projective container of the individual bad actor, Stane, who is selling weapons directly to "bad guys," rather than the "good guys."

In less subversive fashion, *Iron Man 2* goes on to portray Tony Stark's technology being utilized by the United States Air Force, utilizing an Iron Man suit prototype otherwise known as the "Iron Patriot," whereas *Iron Man 3* subsumes its own critique entirely. On the surface, *Iron*

Man 3 might read as subversive, creating a fictionalized terrorist group known as The Mandarin, who winds up being an entirely fabricated mirage played by actors, but funded by yet another businessman in competition with Stark. The film toys with the idea that our American ideas of terrorism are, in some ways, hollow, dramatized and manufactured by media representations. However, this point deteriorates into a cheap joke by the end of the film, completely erasing and losing the thread between terrorism and the media, ultimately having no tangible impact on the narrative. Instead, the film reverts back to its personal qualms between Tony Stark and the "real" villain.

Further blurring the lines between reality and fiction, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) was read by many as a commentary on Occupy Wall Street, echoing themes of class struggle, where the villain, Bane, takes over and shoots up the Gotham Stock Exchange. However, these themes operated more like a sort of cultural zeitgeist, as the film itself was written before the movement began (Schultz). The film portrays the villain Bane working to overthrow the rich, even going so far as to take over Gotham, arming and freeing wrongfully imprisoned inmates, and executing greedy executives. Bane takes over Gotham's City Hall and speaks to the citizens of Gotham, urging them to rise up against the powerful elite,

> Take them up to the surface. People of their status deserve to experience the next era of Western civilization...We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity, and we give it back to you, the people. Gotham is yours. None shall interfere. Do as you please. But start by storming Blackgate, and freeing the oppressed! Step forward, those who would serve, for an army will be raised. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests, and cast out into the cold world that we know and endure. Courts will be convened. Spoils will be

enjoyed. Blood will be shed. The police will survive, as they learn to serve true justice.

This great city... it will endure. Gotham will survive! (*The Dark Knight Rises*)

Of course, quite cynically, Bane's *real* plan involves ultimately destroying Gotham and the West by weaponizing nuclear energy (for reasons that are never fully articulated or made coherent, hence suggesting that the villain has no real political ideology once again). Moreover, the people are never actually granted any agency in the film, as they all exist under Bane's military rule. Once again, like Toomes from Spider-Man, he doesn't *really* believe in this sort of anti-capitalism, it is merely just a means to an end. If anything, the film might be read as an allegory for attempts by the rich, who Batman is a stand-in for, to rebuild their status after the 2008 financial crisis ("Batman's Political"). Remarking on *The Dark Knight Rises*' anti-capitalism sentiment, Fisher remarks,

> Anti-capitalism is nothing new in Hollywood. From *Wall-E* to *Avatar*, corporations are routinely depicted as evil. The contradiction of corporate funded films denouncing corporations is an irony capitalism cannot just absorb, but thrive on. Yet this anti-capitalism is only allowed within limits. *The Dark Knight Rises* draws clear lines: anti-capitalist comment...is fine, but any direct action against the rich, or revolutionary moves towards the redistribution of property will lead to a dystopian nightmare. ("Batman's Political")

Yet, in the past few years, the critiques have become more prescient, subversive and in some ways, still largely problematic. Take for instance *Captain Marvel* (2019) and its loosely pro-refugee, anti-racist, and anti-colonial narrative in conjunction with its main protagonist being not only a member of the United States Air Force, but additionally, with every screening of the film accompanied by a recruitment advertisement for joining the Air Force. The ad proclaims, "Every superhero has an origin story. We all got our start somewhere. For us, it was the U.S. Air

Force." *Captain Marvel* allows viewers to participate in the liberatory fictions of empire, where the U.S. can be viewed as a benevolent force, fighting on the behalf of Others. Similarly, *Wonder Woman* (2017) implies a similar type of imperial feminism where its praxis is geared towards working in tandem with the military apparatus.

Perhaps the film that most vividly absorbs its own critique is Marvel's 2018 film, *Black Panther*. While *Black Panther* presents a critique (or at least, an acknowledgment) of colonialism, capitalism and empire, the critiques all fall to the wayside by the end of the film. In the beginning of the film, we meet T'Challa fulfilling his birthright as the new king of Wakanda, gained through ritual combat. While Wakanda remains isolationist and prosperous, hoarding the super-material vibranium, Nakia converses with T'Challa:

> NAKIA. I have seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing there are people who have nothing.
>
> T'CHALLA. What would you have Wakanda do about it?
>
> NAKIA. Share what we have! We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge for those who need it. Other countries do it, we could do it better.
>
> T'CHALLA. We are not like these other countries, Nakia. If the world found out what we truly are, what we possess, we could lose our way of life. (*Black Panther*)

T'Challa ultimately dismisses Nakia's plea for sharing Wakanda's resources with the global poor. Later in the film, we meet the "villain" of the film, Erik "Killmonger" Stephens, a former MIT graduate, Navy seal, and Joint Special Operations Command operative. Killmonger is presented as the "radical" of the film, even as he is in large part, deeply connected to the "deep state" of U.S. imperialism (the CIA agent in the film, Everett Ross, remarks about how Eric gained the nickname "Killmonger," in part, from racking up confirmed kills in Afghanistan. Killmonger later brags about killing in America, Afghanistan, Iraq, and whatever shadow wars in

Africa he is assumed to have partaken in). The audience is introduced to Killmonger through a critique of colonialism, whereby he remarks to the white museum expert on African art:

> KILLMONGER. Don't trip. I'm gonna take it off your hands for you.
>
> MUSEUM HOST. These items aren't for sale.
>
> KILLMONGER. How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?

Killmonger's storyline ultimately revolves around exercising his own bloodright as a royal outsider, challenging T'Challa for the throne of Wakanda in order to become the new monarch:

> KILLMONGER. Y'all sitting up here comfortable. Must feel good. There's about two billion people all over the world that looks like us, but their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all.
>
> T'CHALLA. And what tools are those?
>
> KILLMONGER. Vibranium. Your weapons.
>
> T'CHALLA. Our weapons will not be used to wage war on the world. It is not our way to be judge, jury and executioner for people who are not our own.
>
> KILLMONGER. Not your own? But didn't life start right here on this continent? So ain't all people your people?
>
> T'CHALLA. I am not king of all people. I am king of Wakanda. And it is my responsibility to make sure our people are safe that vibranium does not fall into the hands of people like you.

In typical capitalist realist fashion, we are left between the options of isolationism or interventionism, as resources are never to be discussed, only ever weapons. In fact, even the vibranium itself in the story cannot be shared because it has the potential to be weaponized. After defeating T'Challa, Killmonger becomes king, and he aims to arm oppressed people around the

world, in order to rise up and "kill those in power, their children, and anyone else who takes their side." He asserts, "The world is gonna start over, and this time, we're on top." While on the surface, his argument reads as radical, what Killmonger is actually proposing is just more of the same, only this time, with different people occupying the positions of power in the same old hierarchies. In other words, he would be exchanging one empire for a different empire of his own making, all while keeping the same systems largely intact. Killmonger is merely fighting for access into an exclusionary system. The film climaxes with a fight between T'Challa and Killmonger, with an interesting exchange between the two:

> KILLMONGER. Your reign is over. You sat up here safe and protected.
>
> T'CHALLA. You want to see us become just like the people you hate so much. Divide and conquer the land as needed.
>
> KILLMONGER. Nah, I learn from my enemies. Beat them at they own game.
>
> T'CHALLA. You have become them! You will destroy the world, Wakanda included.
>
> KILLMONGER. The world took everything away from me! Everything I ever loved. But I'm gonna make sure we're even.

Just like Baron Zemo in *Captain America: Civil War*, for Killmonger, his grievance ultimately becomes personal, not political. After Killmonger is killed by T'Challa, the film ends with T'Challa purchasing buildings in Killmonger's former neighborhood in California, in hopes of turning them into future global outreach centers for Wakanda, equipped with a "science and information exchange." Is this the best we can dream of? The King of Wakanda, with all of the super-material vibranium in the world, can only renovate a building in the "projects?" While perhaps more radical than most mainstream films, *Black Panther* still espouses a rather neoliberal vision for the world, with enough vibranium available to solve global crises remaining

limited to a few outreach centers in California. While *Black Panther* poses as a radical critique of colonialism, it ultimately remains bound by capitalist realism.

Later in 2018, Marvel also released *Avengers: Infinity War*, the premiere capitalist realist film par excellence. However, perhaps ironically, this film might also be read as a critique of capitalism through its bleak form of pessimism. That is, although the film presents itself as the ultimate capitalist realist film (and in some ways, it still is), it actually manages to keep an ironic distance towards itself. In the film, the main villain, Thanos, is the ultimate colonizer, traveling from planet to planet in search of "infinity stones" that will allow him the ability to wipe out half of the universe's population with the snap of his fingers. Presumably he could also use this power to dream up something else, but this is all imagination will allow within capitalist realism. He justifies this of course, like all genociders, in the service of helping people. His argument with his daughter, Gamora, as the sort of benevolent genocider reads as patently absurd:

GAMORA. I was a child when you took me.

THANOS. I saved you.

GAMORA. No, no, we were happy on my home planet.

THANOS. Going to bed hungry, scrounging for scraps? Your planet was on the brink of collapse. I was the one who stopped that. You know what's happened since then? The children born have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies. It's a paradise.

GAMORA. Because you murdered half the planet.

THANOS. A small price to pay for salvation.

GAMORA. You're insane.

THANOS. Little one, it's a simple calculus. This universe has finite resources... if life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correcting.

GAMORA. You don't know that!

THANOS. I'm the only one who knows that. At least, I'm the only one with the will to act

on it. (*Avengers: Infinity War*)

Thanos argues for a Malthusian sort of population control in service of a better existence for those who are living. This is the ultimate capitalist realist argument and lack of vision. That is, rather than creating new ways of structuring existence and allocating resources, the only option that remains is genocide. With all of the infinity stones, presumably Thanos could snap his fingers in exchange for more resources instead of death, but that is simply out of the question and cannot even be conceptualized. However, beyond this, two things remain. First, the idea that there aren't enough resources to go around for everyone is already part of the mythology of capitalism. In other words, the problem is not a scarcity of resources, it is the unequal distribution of said resources. Second, even if half of the population were to be wiped out, without changing the system itself, it would do nothing to change how those same resources would be distributed amongst the remaining population. Much to Thanos's dismay, much of Earth would still be going to sleep without "full bellies" and "clear skies" (*Avengers: Infinity War*). And in the 2019 follow-up film, *Avengers: Endgame* (the current highest grossing film of all time), this is exactly what happens around the universe. After Thanos has successfully completed his genocide of half of the universe, the Avengers travel back in time in *Avengers: Endgame* in order to save the world, and more importantly, return things back to normal.

Conclusion: The End of History or Something New?

"I have seen the future, Captain. There are no flags."

"Not my future."

– Captain America, *Captain America: The First Avenger*

"Fifty years from now you'll be very dead. Your entire generation will fuck this planet into a coma."

– Cable, *Deadpool 2*

"Fuck it. Fine. You wanna go? I'll take you there. See for yourself. Let's go to fucking fantasyland."

– Logan, *Logan*

Where do we go from here? As filmmaker Adam Curtis might remind us, retreating into art will not form the basis for any coherent resistance capable of challenging power (*Hypernormalisation*). However, what art *can* do, is to help us make sense out of our current situation, visualize our fears, anxieties, hopes and dreams, and perhaps synthesize new potentialities previously unimaginable to the masses along the way. While this paper has analyzed the sometimes fascist aesthetics of superhero films in the post 9/11 era that cannot seem to escape from its capitalist realist underpinnings of empire nor its dehumanizing colonial gaze, I would like to end this thesis by discussing two post 9/11 superhero films that I think are the closest representations in the genre towards escaping capitalist realism and empirical reality. While neither film articulates a new vision of the world, both films refuse to grant closure to the neoliberal status quo, and in this way, the ambiguity and openness becomes powerful in creating space for imagining alternatives.

While both the first two iterations of Thor are some of the heaviest offenders of manufacturing digital Others, its third installment, *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) paints a surprising picture for that of a cartoonish demigod. In the film, Thor learns that he has been lied to his entire life, and that his homeland of Asgard was built off of the backs of colonialism and

imperial conquest, headed by his sister Hella and his own, now deceased father. After being trafficked into a sort of gladiator style fighting ring, Thor must fight his way out of his newfound slavery. However, no matter how he performs, even when he wins, the game is still rigged against him, and he cannot escape. With the help of some other fighters, the prisoners rise up, revolt and escape back to his homeland of Asgard, where the only way they can defeat the conqueror Hella is to summon a literal demon from beneath the surface of their society, one that will destroy their homeland in the process. Asgard is destroyed and its people leave aboard a spaceship, with the future travels unknown. Important to the depictions of violence in this film, is that any form of rendering digital Others here is the in service of doing violence to the draugr-like creatures of past colonizers. While the story is not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, at the very least, destruction of a colonial past and an escape towards a new future presents something beyond the status quo.

If destruction and escape cannot suffice, perhaps sacrifice and futurity will do. Much to the chagrin of queer theorist Lee Edelman, who argues against how reproductive futurity and the figure of the child is often utilized to postpone radical change in the present (3), *Logan* offers superhero audiences the closest escape from capitalist realism and empirical reality. While a cynical reading of this film might stop at its metaphor for the wilderness as just being a symbolic escape into another nation state of Canada, I want to challenge this reading and suggest that *Logan* is actually the most subversive superhero film to date. In fact, it is one of the only superhero films (if not, the only) that presents the "villain" as the private corporation itself. The "villain" is not a corrupt individual working for a corporation and exercising power wrongfully, nor is he an evildoer in search of power, nor a part of a corrupt government agency, but rather, the villain isn't even an individual at all. The villain *is* the private corporation of Alkali-

Transigen, its unaccountable but legal abuses within the current system, and its private mercenary army who enforces any dissent altogether.

In the film, set in the future year of 2029, the biotech corporation Alkali-Transigen has privatized mutant development, and has been selectively breeding mutant children in order to be weaponized and controlled in service of the corporation's ultimate goals, profit and monopoly over the marketplace. In other words, their very bodies and lives belong to Alkali-Transigen. The child mutants are not wage workers in the slightest, they are fully born as slaves. The corporation seems to operate without any regulations or bounds whatsoever, as Alkali-Transigen manages to place their mutant suppressant chemicals into the public's food, causing an end to any public mutancy that the corporation is unable to control, weaponize, or monetize for themselves. In this way, capital has subsumed any and all mutancy to the hands of private patents. Thus, with Alkali-Transigen causing an end to public mutancy, this also means an end to any future resistance to their hegemony, since now Alkali-Transigen is the only agency capable of possessing and harnessing mutant capabilities, and surely, within the framework of the film, they will not be held accountable by any governing body that currently exists.

The film revolves around an escaped mutant, Laura, who has been smuggled out of Alkali-Transigen's facility by one of its workers, after discovering that the corporation was planning on euthanizing the child mutants because they could not be controlled to meet the corporation's ends. We meet our protagonist, Logan, who finds himself working a job as a sort of Uber style limousine driver, alienated from daily life, living in the perpetual present, and attempting to save up enough money in order to buy a boat and live off the grid and away from society. In fact, Logan begins the film entirely uninterested in assisting Laura altogether, until he is offered $50,000 by her guardian to escort her to a safe haven for mutants, symbolically titled, "Eden." However, Alkali-Transigen will not allow for mutants to exist beyond their control, and

sends out their private mercenary army, the Reavers, who seem to have no oversight nor territorial constraints, to hunt down any mutant seeking refuge (think Blackwater). Over the course of the film, Logan becomes skeptical that Eden even exists at all, and clashes with Laura over her belief in such a silly idea of futurity, remarking, "Fuck it. Fine. You wanna go? I'll take you there. See for yourself. Let's go to fucking Fantasyland" (*Logan*). In this sense, Logan cannot believe that a better future exists, but he is ultimately pushed into pursuing it through Laura's insistent belief and lack of reflexive impotence.

After a brief (and tragic) encounter with a family and a different group of mercenary thugs who fight for the protection of privatized water against public use, Logan escorts Laura to the mutant refugee meeting point, refusing the $50,000 and allowing the mutant kids to keep it for themselves. Even after discovering the mutant refuge exists against his own disbelief, Logan still abandons the children and the new future. It is not until discovering that the Reavers (and by extension, Alkali-Transigen) have hunted down the mutant children on their way to Eden, that Logan decides he must return in order to help the children flee from being captured and ultimately killed, robbed of any new type of future whatsoever. After a long fight with the corporate mercenary army and its corporate figurehead, Logan sacrifices himself in order for the children to escape, as he is killed ruthlessly by Alkali-Transigen's genetically engineered corporate copy of himself, X-24. It is Laura and her own hope for survival, who kills the corporate copy of Logan, X-24. In his last dying words to Laura, Logan tells her (and perhaps his former self), "You don't have to fight anymore. Don't be what they made you to be." The film ends with the mutant children burying Logan and departing for Eden.

While *Logan* does not articulate any coherent alternative vision to capitalist realism or empirical reality, it does however refuse it. Most specifically, in Logan's final words to Laura, he reminds her not to fulfill her weaponized future, but instead, to reject the violence altogether and

to create something new and different. The film's ending as open and ambiguous allows space for both alternative futures or for the reification of the past. That is, will the mutant children be hunted down in the end? Will they live just as previous generations did? Or will they create a new type of society in Eden?

In this thesis I have argued that post 9/11 superhero films, bound by both capitalist realism and empirical reality, utilize a uniquely post-9/11 Manichean framework whereby the destruction of cities and civilians are rendered unimportant, imperial guilt is both projected and rejected onto villains and dehumanized digital Others, and the critiques of such systems and structures are dissolved and continuously postponed. With over 20 superhero projects slated to arrive on the big screen within the next few years, one might reasonably ask, how long can this boom of post 9/11 superhero films continue to sustain? Similarly, one might also ask the same question regarding U.S. empire. Are we destined for what Mark Fisher refers to as "the slow cancellation of the future," or the perpetual sort of anachronistic inertia disguised and redressed as the new but increasingly foreclosed (*Ghosts of My Life* 6)? Or are these all just temporal fictions? As Hardt and Negri write, "Empire exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order...Empire presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary" (11). Whatever the future holds, superheroes won't save us.

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