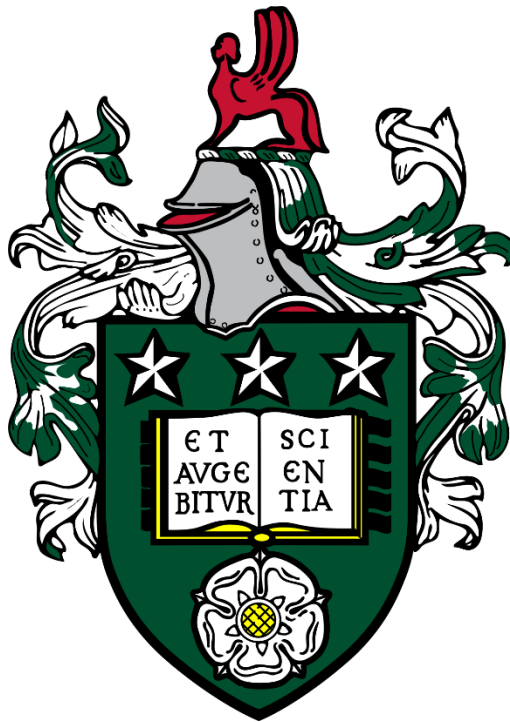


Disability and Disfigurement in Twenty-first Century Comic-Book Films

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Abstract:

Superhero films are known for their fantastical stretches of reality and of human bodies. Their status as an accessibly and highly popular cultural form makes them rich sources of Anglo-American values, especially surrounding disability, but they have received little critical attention. Superpowers often enable the body to perform acts that, outside of the canon, exist only in the viewer's imagination, such as flying. These bodily transformations, much like disability, often end up serving as narrative catalysts. Some superheroes (and many villains) are literally disabled, but, as this thesis explores, disability in the superhero film is most often metaphorical. Super-bodies carry a great depth of meaning, from their political propaganda status with nationalist militarism symbols such as Captain America, to their furtherment of the supercrip idea. Normality and freakery are common contrasting themes throughout both Marvel and DC cinematic universes: the deep desire of the super-person to fit in with non-disabled/non-powered society is undercut by the films' unconscious mimicry of freak shows. The superhero film is abundant with disability metaphor and provides a compelling space in which to explore how disability, the fantastic, and popular culture intersect to form narratives where extraordinary bodies are intrinsic to the basic functioning of the superhero genre.

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Abbreviations:

MCU: Marvel Cinematic Universe.

TDK: *The Dark Knight* (2008).

WS: Winter Soldier.

Introduction:

Contexts

Disability studies has long focussed on representations of disability within popular culture and entertainment, starting from the early practice of the freak show and continuing to modern media such as film and television. Cultural disability studies expands on the idea of performativity: as Hsy describes, disability is not an innate quality, it is a 'phenomenon [...] actively created through embodied performance' (2015, p.37). When placed in contrast to the 'normalcy' of the able-bodied, disability is formed as a 'problem' (Davis, 1995, p.24) that must be explained: it 'demands a story' (Bérubé, 2005, p.570). Disabled characters are often inserted into narratives because of this demand. They are often said to act as 'narrative prosthesis', a term coined by Mitchell and Snyder that describes how disabled people in literary discourse often enact disability either 'as a stock feature of characterization', 'as an opportunistic metaphorical device', or both (2014, p.47). These ideas can be applied to a multitude of genres: recently comic studies has started to focus on disability, specifically about super-people (a term I will use to describe anyone with powers, hero or villain) and the tropes of the superhero genre. Alaniz notes that 'physical dominance is a key element' of the superhero identity in the Silver Age (1956-1970) of comic books (2014, p.10). For example, the fight between superhero and supervillain often takes a physical form, hence the requirement for 'dominance'. Societally, able-bodied people are perceived to have physical advantages over disabled people, who face discrimination based on their bodily differences. Despite the popularity of heroes with real-world disabilities, such as Oracle and Daredevil, super-bodies often embody what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson terms the 'normate' (1997, p.8): the mythic idea of 'perfection'.¹ This suggests that, in many cases, superpowers and disabilities are not congruent.

¹ Oracle is one of the super-alter-egos of Barbara Gordon in the Batman comic-book series. Although Gordon is better known for becoming Batgirl, in 1988's *The Killing Joke*, she is

There is a temptation for able-bodied people to believe that the body can be changed (here disabled) ‘as easily as changing clothes’ (Siebers, 2017, p.326). The idea that disability is an identity one can take on in a moment is one primarily linked to the medical model of disability, where disability is viewed as a corporeal difference.² The bodily limitations presented by the medical model of disability produce the ‘fear’ of disability. In most narratives, superhero films deny this assumption: the journey to accepting the superhero identity and reaching the fully-formed persona (often complete with costume and a superhero name) has been explored throughout superhero media and is on the rise with the Marvel Disney+ TV series, the long-form format of which allows for character development over 10 hour-long episodes versus one two-hour film. The transcendence into embracing this form of disability (superpowers) and building an identity out of it, disregards the medical model. Instead, superhero media is moving towards a form of disability that produces not the lack that the medical model often prescribes, but a gain (of powers).

When understood through the social model, disability is created through our environments, whether it is architects creating buildings with stairs but no ramps, or strangers assuming bodily differences automatically mean someone needs assistance. Attempting to manage a disabled body in an environment ‘not built for [it]’ (Garland-Thomson, 2014) is a stark reminder of the stickiness of disability, the ‘effect of surfacing, [...] *of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs*’ (Ahmed, 2014, p.90, original emphasis). Garland-Thomson’s theory of the misfit states that it is the ‘juxtaposition’ (2011, p.593) of disabled people and ablenormative society which creates stickiness. Disability remains misunderstood by able-bodied people and assumed to be a vulnerability of the self rather than a continuous

shot and paralysed by the Joker and her character was retired for two years. In her reintroduction in the *Suicide Squad* comic-series, she is a wheelchair user due to her paralysis, which prompts her to create a new super identity – Oracle. Gordon only claims the Batgirl mantle when she is able-bodied. Having been ‘cured’ of her paralysis in later comics, she takes back her Batgirl identity and shuns that of Oracle.

² By medical model, I am referring to the idea that disability and bodily difference are a biological ‘problem’ that can be pathologised through diagnosis and requires ‘cure’ or ‘eliminat[ion]’ (Siebers, 2008, p.3).

mistake by the world around them that assumes, or in the case of physical structures such as buildings, enforces restrictions. Garland-Thomson highlights the production of disability in the eyes of the viewer: even when a disability is 'seldom discernible or legible', it becomes apparent (and becomes 'disability') when the 'characteristic[s of disability emerge] in some perceptible way in the social environment' (2014). One contemporary view of disability, considering Garland-Thomson's comments, 'embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal' (Siebers, 2017, pp.326-7).

The films analysed in this thesis are largely produced and set in the USA: a country considered by most to be developed, but which still withholds rights for disabled people. Pfeiffer (1994) documents the struggle for disabled people throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to marry, bear children, and parent—rights which most able-bodied, white, heterosexual people have never had withheld in such a broad and discriminatory manner. These struggles are not contained to the past: Rothler (2017) details a 2013 case where a disabled woman was denied access to her child (who was born using donor sperm, ovum, and surrogacy) and was deemed unfit to parent purely because she was disabled. Her child was legally declared 'parentless' and placed into the foster and adoption system regardless of having a mother who wanted to keep them. Despite the introduction of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, barriers (physical, legal and social) remain in place for disabled people. For example, Americans with disabilities do not yet have full marriage equality, which was granted to queer people in 2015. If a disabled person gets married, they risk losing access to their Social Security Disability benefits (Pulrang, 2020), therefore losing financial freedom and becoming more reliant on their new spouse – a reliance and vulnerability that the ADA was meant to prevent. In addition, White Cane Laws require a blind person to carry a white cane (or in some cases, use a guide dog) to identify themselves as blind (VisionAware, 2021), outing themselves as disabled to receive necessary accommodations. While blind people are not explicitly punished by this law, the requirement of the

white cane when some blind people may prefer another aid, enforces a need to live up to a standard of disability, and a pre-conceived idea by lawmakers of how disability should be performed.

Disability in US law has continued to be misunderstood through the twenty-first century. The Supreme Court, having 'misperceiv[ed]' the ADA as requiring 'special treatment' for people with disabilities, narrowed the legal definition of disability in the 2000s (Hill and Goldstein, 2015, p.2227). Heavily restricting what counted as disability left many open to being discriminated against without protection. As with the White Cane Laws, the change to the ADA dictated that disability could only be lived in a certain way: people with coeliac disease, skin disorders, HIV, and many other conditions were excluded because the nine Justices of the Supreme Court did not include these in how they defined disability. Even in the contemporary age of one of the world's most developed countries, disabled lives and livelihoods continue to rely on lawmakers deeming them to be 'disabled enough'. Though the definition of disability was restored to its previous, broader status in 2008, the valuable years lost for many disabled people because they did not have the 'right' kind of disability had devastating consequences.

Industries

The nature of comic-book films allows them to imagine possibilities beyond our current achievements: as Schalk writes, understandings of disability differ in a context of 'high-tech assistive devices, altered abilities, and fictional worlds' (2016, p.82), making the conventions of the genre essential to consider when figuring disability and disfigurement. The titular character in *Daredevil* (2004), a blind lawyer-by-day/vigilante-by-night, for example, is not an accurate representation of blindness, because, to make him 'super', he perpetuates the common myth that blind people have significantly increased power in their other senses. The superhero genre does not require accurate representation of the actual-world because as fiction it benefits from extensive creative license. Superpowers serve as a 'topical Trojan horse'

(Row-Heyveld, 2015, p.521) for ideas about disability. One stereotype of disability is that it can be ‘the gateway to special abilities’; we might then infer that some who have a superpower (‘special abilities’) are first and foremost disabled (Siebers, 2017, p.316). However, it is essential to make clear that the superhero genre does not claim to portray disabled people in line with actual-world disabled experience. The genre itself works as a *metaphor* for disability (Burt, 2020, p.602, emphasis mine), not claiming to speak for disabled people’s experience but instead portraying aspects of it. The comic book film is where some of the most ‘exciting’, and, most importantly, ‘widely circulated’ narratives about disability emerge (Row-Heyveld, 2015, p.521): Daredevil can make the blindness myth true because he exists in a universe where powers like heightened senses are possible. However, as this thesis will discuss, the superhero universes and the ways in which they represent disability (as a power/metaphor) have complexities much like the actual-world.

The corporeal, environmental, and representational demands of the superhero body clearly differ from those of human bodies. Existing in the fictional, rather than actual, world means that superhero bodies can perform actions that humans like the viewers (disabled or not) cannot. Actions like these do not rely on an actual-world level of ability, but instead (because of their fictional nature) work outside the ideas of the bodies that exist in the actual-world. The environmental demands also differ. People in the actual-world do not have to conform to a hero/villain archetype, but within the fictional universe these boundaries are more dualistic.³ Developing this, chapter two of this thesis will explore the demand for performance, stemming from the disability and disfigurement of the characters, and how this relates

³ For clarity: ‘humans’ in this thesis means the person who exists both in our universe and the comic ones: someone with no powers. This label does not mark actual-world ability. They could be disabled or able-bodied. ‘Powers’ means a superhuman ability of some sort, for example, Captain America has powers of super speed and strength. Characters like the Joker, however, do not have powers. In both *TDK* and *Joker*, he is human, although in the former he has a disfigurement in the form of a Glasgow grin. ‘Disability’ will be used as an encompassing term and can refer to an actual-world disability, like Xavier’s paralysis in *XMen*, or a power that this thesis explores as a metaphor for disability, such as Spider-Man’s spider-related affliction. Usage in the latter form will be made clear.

to freakery and the freak show. The chapter will also explore how the need to perform constructs and characterises the hero/villain archetypes.

Comic-book adaptations have dominated the twenty-first century film landscape. While comic-book films have traditionally been considered insufficiently cinematic to be in the running for prestigious awards such as the Oscars (outside technical categories such as special effects), this has started to shift in recent years, with several nominations and wins for both Marvel and DC films.⁴ Comic-book films have also been incredibly successful at the box office: Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films average nearly a billion dollars each, with a franchise-average approval rating of 84% on Rotten Tomatoes (Harrison et al., 2019). Similarly, when DC's *TDK* released in 2008, it won two Academy Awards, brought in over a billion dollars and at the time became the fourth highest-grossing film ever (Box Office Mojo, 2021).⁵ By 2018, over half of all 18-34-year-olds in the USA had seen at least one of Marvel's *Avengers* series (Navarro, 2018). Superhero films clearly play a significant role in 2010s popular culture consciousness. Comic book films are some of the best-known, most-important films of our time, part of an entertainment industry that wields significant soft power, and the superhero genre is a vehicle for underlying ideologies. When the world is watching, representations in popular culture (such as superhero films) matter, because *this* is where many are developing their ideas about disability.

The comic-book genre is especially valuable to analyse because of (rather than despite) its low status within cinematic society (Locke, 2005). A 'twice damned' example of Anglo-American culture, comics were damned for being popular and not high culture, and damned again as a genre for being a 'most outlandish fantasy' with 'absurd characters acting in the most bizarre fashion'

⁴ Exceptions include both Heath Ledger and Joaquin Phoenix's portrayals of the Joker in *TDK* (2008) and *Joker* (2019) respectively. Both were nominated for, and won, acting awards at the Oscars (Ledger for Best Supporting Actor and Phoenix for Best Actor). 2018's *Black Panther* was the first superhero film ever to be nominated for Best Picture at the 2019 Oscars, followed by *Joker* in 2020.

⁵ Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* now hold positions 2 and 5 respectively, *TDK* is down to 48.

(Locke, 2005, p.29). To find in comic-book films (a low-status genre) similar ideas about disability to those found in academic discourse (a high-status culture) provides support for Locke's claim that, culturally, 'we all draw from the same rhetorical well' (2005, p.29). This statement may be overarching (a whitened, Westernised view), but the reach of comic-book films manages to transcend nations, with Marvel catering to international audiences by adapting superhero stories where the hero is not American.⁶ When looking at disability (a category for which discrimination is nearly universal across nations), rhetoric is essential in constructing our understanding of ideas about disability. Dolmage writes that disability rhetoric highlights how disability 'creates and multiplies meaningful possibilities' (2017, p.215). These possibilities open the door for interpretations of bodies outside the 'normate', a figure that society perceives to exist much more than it does in reality; a description people attempt to fit much like Cinderella's stepsisters attempt to fit the glass slipper (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.8). The normate is exactly the fantasy image of 'perfect' bodily health, beauty, and functioning; it is the fantastical, 'rhetorical well' Locke describes society drawing cultural values from.

Framing Disability, Disfigurement, and the People who Act Them

Disfigurement, defined in its verb form as 'to mar the figure or appearance of, destroy the beauty of; to deform, deface' (OED, 2022), often functions socially to disable the person. Under the ADA, cosmetic disfigurement is defined and protected as a disability (ADA, 2008) due to its potential to have an impact on the person's ability to perform major life activities, for example

⁶ 2021's *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, which is partially set in China, and has a largely Asian cast, was a film which is described as a film meant to speak to the 'wider Asian diaspora' by writer Dave Callaham (Yu, 2021). 2018's *Black Panther*, which was the first comic-book film to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, also drew significant media attention internationally for featuring a mostly-Black cast and gained enormous cultural importance not just among African-Americans, but Africa, where the film is set (in the fictional nation Wakanda). *Black Panther* was a success in Africa, becoming the highest grossing film ever in east, west, and southern Africa upon release (Chutel, 2018).

holding a job. While disfigurements may not be physically limiting in the way that physical disabilities are, the disfigured person can often face discrimination at work based on a perceived negative reaction by customers, co-workers, or managers. This thesis largely discusses disfigurement when pertaining to facial features such as the Joker's Glasgow grin in *TDK*. Our faces are our most distinct features: they are often what we use to identify people we know or are searching for, as well as being used to communicate both verbally and non-verbally. The 'mar[ring]' of faces, which hold so much power and purpose, serves as an interruption to the gaze where we search to understand the person through their features. It is unsurprising then that disfigurement in comic-book films is often reserved for villains – as chapter two will discuss, the visual disruption of disfigurement is a technique often used to indicate evil.

This thesis will explore representations of disability and disfigurement in twenty-first-century comic-book films, spanning 2000 to 2019, the year which saw the culmination of the Avengers saga so far with *Avengers: Endgame*, the final film for major characters Steve Rogers/Captain America and Tony Stark/Iron Man. I am focussing on Earth-born characters to set them in a recognisable contextual background: the USA, where most of these films take place and where most of their Earth-born characters are from/raised. All the characters analysed are human-born. While the X-Men consider themselves to be mutants, a race separate from homo sapiens as we know them, I will be including them in this 'human-born' category as they are born into and grow up in human families. Mutancy and disability have clear parallels in their experiences: bodily difference leads to their ostracization from society, including legal rights as portrayed in one of *X-Men* (2000)'s opening scenes, in which Jean Grey (a mutant) argues in Congress against a proposed law that would force mutants to identify themselves to the government. Until their powers manifest at puberty (by which point they have developed much of their understanding of the world), mutants experience the world in the same ways humans do. Further, actual-world genetic differences do not make a person a non-human, so as mutants gain their abilities from a genetic difference, they will be categorised as human.

In this thesis I will examine how the characters in superhero films (both hero and villain) are often seen socially in ways similarly to actual-world disabled people, with their powers or mutations taking the place of (or working alongside) actual-world physical disabilities. Drawing from ideas about real-world disability, from the freak shows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to performativity and the need to account for bodily differences, this thesis applies these to the world in which powers and mutation are considered extraordinary bodies. Chapter one will focus on origin stories and how these function to account for bodily differences, like actual-world disabilities. Chapter two will explore performance and work, especially concerning the freak show. The performance of bodily difference and its use for entertainment means that many of the heroes and villains featured in this thesis are compelled to embody an archetype because of their disability or disfigurement. Their extraordinary bodies are put to work, and heroes' powers are exploited by agencies such as the MCU's SHIELD (the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, a fictional extra-governmental agency under which the Avengers work) to help the masses. The conclusion will highlight the lasting impact of these depictions as well as looking to the future of disability, disfigurement, and the comic-book film.

Little work has been done within critical disability studies on comic-book adaptations. This thesis expands the critical field of superhero studies to draw on interdisciplinary approaches. Approaching this utilising a disability studies and medical humanities perspective, this thesis offers an original examination of disability metaphor in this widely popular film genre and argues that the superhero film is an essential and exciting ground in which both academics and audiences can explore ideas about disability and bodily difference. José Alaniz's 2014 book *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* was the only book dedicated to disability and the superhero genre consulted during research, and this thesis expands upon Alaniz's ideas by applying them to film where Alaniz explores the comic-book source. Jan Grue (2021) and Cynthia Barounis (2013) have published journal articles on disability in the MCU and a case study of Heath Ledger's Joker in TDK respectively, topics which this thesis incorporates when it

explores the original ideas of the origin story as a key point of disability metaphor and the performance of being super. Expanding research in this area is essential: superhero films in their immense popularity reach a variety of audiences and therefore disability representation in films with such mass box-office appeal should be examined and researched significantly more than currently. This thesis will present a compelling argument for superhero films as a cultural wealth of ideas about disabled and differing bodies and in looking at characters from across both DC and Marvel Studios, will show that the ideas explored are key tropes of the genre. I will prove that disability is an integral, though near-invisible, element of the superhero narrative and, through untangling the disability metaphor, justify my assertion that superhero media is an area of academic research that needs and deserves further attention.

Though this thesis attempts to cover a broad spectrum of characters, including those from both Marvel and DC Studios, it does not have the breadth needed to cover every character, or even every twenty-first-century iteration of a character without loss of quality, in-depth analysis. Character selection was largely done based on potential content and perceived links between the themes that emerge from analysis of these characters. For example, this thesis covers Heath Ledger's Joker in significant detail, Joaquin Phoenix's Joker in some detail, but Jared Leto's Joker (from 2016's *Suicide Squad*) is omitted. This decision, as one example of many made in the process of planning this thesis, was made based not only on a lesser degree of relevance in Leto's Joker's case (he is considered 'insane' which falls outside the boundaries of physical disability explored in this thesis), but also because Leto's Joker lacks an origin story entirely. This excludes him from the first chapter, in which Ledger and Phoenix's Jokers are primarily discussed. Therefore, including Leto's Joker would have required a widening of the thesis's limitations on physical and cognitive disability to include mental illness and madness, an idea impossible given the word limit. The characters included in this thesis were selected to create a pool of material

with linking themes of origin stories and performance that exemplify the disability metaphor.

One of the key aspects of analysing Earth-born, human-presenting characters, is that many of them also have the privilege of passing, in both senses of the word (no powers, and no disability). The comic-book-trope of the double life, the Jekyll-and-Hyde parallel of the normal citizen and the super, is traditional in these narratives. Superman becomes Clark Kent, feigning needing glasses to disguise his secretly hyper-abled body. Tobin Siebers writes that disabled people often 'disguise one kind of disability with another' or 'exaggerat[e]' their disability in a display he describes as 'structurally akin to passing' (2008, p.100). Superman disguises his superpowers, his extraordinariness, by wearing glasses because this makes him blend in; it does not invite questions or any other form of attention. He wants to look as 'normal' as possible. In relation to the latter practice of exaggerating disability to pass in some way, Daredevil hides his abilities and masquerades as a more stereotypical blind person (despite his ability to use biological sonar imaging to construct how the world around him appears) because it offers him the protection of vulnerability. No one would imagine that the unassuming, quiet, *blind* lawyer is also the person performing acrobatics and fighting criminals around Hell's Kitchen. As Alaniz (2014) writes, Daredevil succeeds in hiding his disability from the villains he fights, passing as able-bodied when needed to hide the same vulnerability that protects him as Matt Murdock. The comic-book character's need to masquerade as something they are not (whether a regular civilian, able-bodied, or other) is a key part of their experience, much as disabled people have to often turn their disability up or down (for example, turning disability up in order to be considered disabled 'enough' for benefits, turning it down to avoid ableism) in order to move through society as easily as able-bodied people can.

None of the actors in comic-book adaptations have the powers they portray, but none of them have the actual-world disabilities either. Samuel L. Jackson has perfect use of his left eye. Ben Affleck is not blind. Neither James

McAvoy nor Patrick Stewart are wheelchair users. Recently, Charlie Cox's portrayal of Matt Murdock/Daredevil in the Netflix television series *Daredevil* (2015-2018) and the 2021 film *Spider-Man: No Way Home* has provided an example of a portrayal of a disabled person that goes beyond holding a white cane. While playing the blind Matt Murdock, Cox worked with Joe Strechay (a blind consultant) to learn blind skills, ranging from walking in busy New York City to cooking and cleaning (Strechay, 2019), actions Murdock rarely (if ever) performs on screen. Going beyond learning what will be portrayed on screen shows that Cox was dedicated to quasi-method playing the role of a blind man, rather than learning only the necessary skills and acting blind in front of a camera. Cox's performance has been complimented by many, with the American Foundation for the Blind awarding him a Helen Keller Achievement Award in 2015 for his portrayal (AFB, 2015). Previously to this, however, Cox struggled to play a blind man, saying at the Wizard World conference (Palmer, 2016):

“On the first season, I was trying to figure out how to do it. I went to this specialist, an opticianist – and I had these lenses made that were identical to my eyes but they completely blinded me. You put them in and I couldn't see a thing and I thought great, I'll do that and I don't have to do any acting. The problem with that was that after every take, someone from the crew had to come and get me and lead me away and kind of sit me down. After the second day, I was like this is going to get really old, really quick.”

Anecdotes such as this show how able-bodied actors are afforded a privilege they often do not consider when 'cripping up'. Though Cox found success after working extensively with Strechay, navigating the busy streets of New York City with him while blindfolded, he had options of how to play blind. He was able to choose when and where to wear the lenses, thus removing the difficulty for cast and crew to assist him once he chose to forgo the physical blind experience. Actually-blind people do not have this ability to un-blind themselves.

Regardless of how powerful their performance, able-bodied actors portraying disabled people are now often subject to controversy. The practice of casting

non-disabled actors as disabled characters is, as Sandahl writes, ‘called pejoratively “cripping up”’ (2017, p.464). These actors (much like Dustin Hoffman, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Tom Hanks to name but a few) ‘crip up’ and ‘win the hearts of millions’ (Bérubé, 2005, p.575) alongside receiving critical acclaim, facing none of the discrimination I highlight above. The cultural reception of able-bodied actors who play disabled people in comparison to that for actually-disabled people is vastly different; it is often said that a disabled person is an ideal role to play for an able-bodied actor to win an Oscar (Sandahl, 2019, p.90; Tarricone, 2019). The ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’ campaign has seen attention in recent years regarding actors “cripping up,” and this attention similarly has been directed towards cisgender actors who portray transgender people in films. Eddie Redmayne famously played trans woman Lili Elbe in *The Danish Girl* in 2015 and was nominated for the Oscar for Best Actor for it. In 2021, he admitted that accepting the role was a ‘mistake’, and that the bigger issue was ‘many people don’t have a chair at [the casting] table’ (Lang, 2021). Having ‘cripped up’ to play Professor Stephen Hawking in 2014’s *The Theory of Everything* (another role for which he was nominated, and won, Best Actor), Redmayne has never issued a similar apology for playing a disabled man.

The Superhero on Screen

How is the superhero seen on screen? It needs noting here that many of the actors cast in superhero and villain roles are often considered exceptionally attractive in contemporary society. Five of People magazine’s ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ recipients have considerable roles in films featured in this thesis (People, 2021).⁷ Similarly, Scarlett Johansson (who plays Russian assassin Black Widow) is the only woman to be awarded Esquire’s ‘Sexiest Woman Alive’ award twice (in 2006 and 2013) and is noted in Western society as a

⁷ They are, in chronological order: Ben Affleck (2002, [Daredevil]), Hugh Jackman (2008, [Wolverine]), Bradley Cooper (2011, [Rocket Raccoon]), Chris Hemsworth (2014, [Thor]), Paul Rudd (2021, [Ant-Man]). If we count men from the list who have appeared in any Marvel or DC films since 2000, the number goes up to 12 to make up 57% of awardees.

sex symbol.⁸ Villains too are played by actors noted for their attractiveness (though, rather than making the villain attractive, this normally points focus to the ‘transformation’ of the actor). Heath Ledger’s casting as the Joker in Christopher Nolan’s *TDK* sparked controversy (Beall, 2006; Jolin, 2012) since previously he had taken on more comedic or romantic roles. To audiences, Ledger was a ‘misfit’ (Garland-Thomson, 2011). He deviated from the person fans thought should play the Joker: a villain known for his scars. Instead, Ledger was known for playing the leading man: a role characterised by its desirability. Though actors by profession are known for their ability to transform into a variety of different characters, the ‘incongruent relationship’ (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p.592) between Ledger’s usual roles and the Joker meant that for many prior to the film’s release, he was the wrong choice.

Actors who are cast in superhero films often undergo a strict fitness regime to achieve the desired body type. One news-article (about Chris Pratt, in his role as Star-Lord in *Guardians of the Galaxy*) observed that the purpose of these regimes is to take them from ‘a guy who could probably be the guardian of his own lunch but definitely not a whole galaxy’ (Stein, 2015, no pagination) to a certified superhero body in the space of just a few months. The intense workouts and diets are well documented (Stein, 2015; Natale, 2018; Williams Bustos, 2020; Jussim, c2021) and it is clear that there is a certain type of body (muscled, conventionally attractive, able-bodied) that filmmakers envisage as a superhero. The original comics were able to defy bodily norms, being one of the first media to ‘visually celebrat[e] bodies’

⁸ Defined as ‘a person widely regarded as the epitome of sexual attractiveness and glamour’ (OED, 2022), sex symbol as a label has largely been applied to women and is typically a gender-marked term, with males being referred to as ‘male sex symbols’. Scarlett Johansson is seen in modern culture to be a ‘cultural mechanism’, a ‘rhetorical “text”’ that is ‘singularly suited to advertise a type of disguised misogyny reflective of male resistance to a looming posthuman, gender, [...] egalitarian ontology’ (Matthews, 2018, p.5). Indeed the sex symbol’s appeal is said to have evolved to lie in her ‘cool and calculated quasi-godlike posthuman persona’ (Evans & Riley, 2013, p.269). Johansson idealises this persona not only through her roles in films like the MCU series, but also in her status as a ‘posthuman “pin-up girl”’. It is under this status where we see her become a sex symbol; she is ‘both apotheosised and objectified, regarded and disregarded’ (Matthews, 2018, p.5). This societal status made her the ideal choice for *Black Widow*: objectifiable, but in a cool posthuman manner that simultaneously gains regard from the viewer.

(Fawaz, 2016, no pagination) that did not fit the physical stability of the social ideals. Drawing bodies lent itself to the caricatured figures we associate with the genre, although this did not translate easily to the screen. Superheroes on film are often muscular since society associates the fat body with an unhealthy and unfit person: fat superheroes simply have never been seen on screen. The only exception is that of 'Fat Thor' in *Endgame* when Thor (deeply depressed from losing to Thanos and allowing half the universe to be turned to dust) gains a significant amount of weight due to alcoholism and comfort eating. Chris Hemsworth, who plays Thor, wore a fat-suit to portray the heavier superhero (see fig. 1), and although writers wanted Thor to suddenly 'snap back' to his previous, extremely fit body, Hemsworth disagreed (Setoodeh, 2019):

Hemsworth fought to keep his pear-shaped body. "I enjoyed that version of Thor," he says. "It was so different than any other way I played the character. And then it took on a life of its own."



Figure 1: Chris Hemsworth as Thor in *Thor: Ragnarok* and a behind-the-scenes clip of *Endgame* (Disney, 2017, 2019, used in Henry, 2019).

Instead, transformation turns the stare of the viewer to a gaze 'born of astonishment' at the 'shock' of Thor's dishevelled appearance, a look which, Germaine writes, is often (as a stereotype) presented by severely depressed individuals (2016, no pagination) and is therefore recognised by the viewer as such. It is unsurprising then that writers wanted Thor to revert to his

incredibly fit physique: a study by Bauer et al. found that the most prevalent motif viewers identified in superhero films was fighting and the viewer 'expects' heroes to engage in physical altercations (2017, p.1295). The writers wanted to rely on 'fat Thor' for narrative prosthesis and then transform him back into his idealised body through non-realistic means in time for the final battle. To use 'fat Thor' as narrative prosthesis, following the definition outlined in the introduction, would see his fatness used to symbolise his depression and loss and to then be magically resolved when the character was expected to conform to his typical actions – i.e.. when Thor teams up with the remaining Avengers, narrative prosthesis would see him return to his previous, muscular physique in order to conform to what society and the filmmakers think a body that can fight should look like. Instead, the maintaining of his overweight shape provides a divergence from the Western norm of fitness, an essential step for introducing different bodies to the comic-book film.

In addition, Thor is not a human (like the characters examined in the body of this thesis) but rather modelled on a Norse god. Marvel makes a statement by choosing the god, rather than a human, to undergo such a dramatic bodily change. He exhibits the physical repercussions of the trauma he undergoes in *Infinity War* (failure to save the world aside, Thor's brother is killed in front of him in the opening scene of the film). Thor's narrative centres around him being 'worthy'; without this quality he would be unable to wield Mjolnir, his Asgardian-made, enchanted hammer. Despite his alcoholism and his deep depression (which are physically represented by his new fat body), Thor can wield Mjolnir with as much ease as previously, proving that despite the negative view society holds of fat bodies, elements of his character and superhero status are unchanged. Taggart writes that in Norse mythology, 'gods were not limited by human-like bodies in their interactions with the world' (2019, p.16). Although the Thor of the MCU is not a direct copy of that of mythology, he is not limited by his fat body, just like his Norse counterpart. In Thor's gaining weight but not losing powers as a result, Marvel proves that bodies that differ from the 'norm' of superheroes can be heroic too.

The visuality of the film format allows for an examination of bodies by the viewer that enhances their extraordinary status.⁹ The extremely fit body (that actors work for months to achieve) is arguably much more of an extreme than Thor's fat body, which is much more common in the actual-world. The difference between these bodies, the hyper-fit, the obese, and the disabled (which are all extraordinary and go beyond what society considers 'normal') is perception. Someone who has an athletic body is seen as desirable, as 'more capable' than someone fat or disabled in modern society. Viewers are 'stunned' when disability appears and cannot 'accommodat[e] it as an expected part of' life (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.20), yet bodies on what many would perceive as the other end of the ability spectrum (the hyperabled/the extremely fit) are far less usual.

There are instances where the extremely fit tips over into what many consider the 'grotesque', the form so muscled it becomes 'undesirable'. Bodybuilders focus specifically on the build-up of muscle for aesthetic purposes, displaying their bodies in competitions which many consider to be modern 'freak shows' (Sparkes et al., 2018, Liokaftos, 2014, p.323, Denham, 2008, p.24). Often linked to steroid abuse and early deaths, bodybuilding can be a dangerous practice, and it promotes a bodily ideal that is difficult to achieve. The exhibitionist practice of bodybuilding displays is still commonplace in 2022, unlike typical freak shows, and has expanded to accommodate wheelchair bodybuilders as detailed in Sparkes et al. (2018). For many competitors, professional bodybuilding serves to transgress both the ideals of 'physical perfection' and of 'ugliness and extremity' (Sparkes et al., 2018, p.1319). As a space for those 'whose bodies transgress binary norms [...] of gender, sexuality, and/or disability' (Sparkes et al., 2018, p.1320), bodybuilding can be a way to reject bodily norms. To those who practice it, bodybuilding represents an idealistic version of the human body, as evidenced in the titles of competitions such as Mr America, Mr World, and even Mr Olympia. The explicit connection of bodybuilders to gods, chasing

⁹ Even bodies that are largely computer-generated, such as that of Thanos in *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, do not escape the visual analysis of the stare. Viewers incorporate these into their cognition of what bodies can look like in fictional universes such as the MCU with ease.

achievement of a body that is superior to that of other humans, reflects the positive view of bodybuilding as an ‘art form’, an ‘extreme sport’ (Liokaftos, 2014, p.323).¹⁰ The ‘taste for hyperbole and novelty’ (Liokaftos, 2014, p.324) that bodybuilding shares with the entertainment industry has led to new dominant models of the superhuman and futuristic bodies. Much like super bodies in comic-book films (in which bodybuilders have become a commonplace extra), bodybuilding is a category in which the demand for ‘exhilarating spectacles of the ‘unreal’” (Liokaftos, 2014, p.324) is now commonplace.

On Looking, Staring, and Gazing

It is important to define the stare and the gaze in the context of this thesis. The gaze is a relationship that is inherently tied to power relations; the starrer often holds power over the object of their stare. Foucault’s idea of the clinical gaze, where medical professionals look past their patient as a person and instead focus on the body part they consider to be affected (for example, focussing on the absent leg of an amputee), posits that this form of the gaze dehumanises its subjects, largely disabled people. When people with extraordinary bodies appear on the screen, or in any visual format in which the stare is possible, they (and in the clinical gaze’s idea, their body) are bombarded by the stare.

Superhero films maintain a key focus on the extraordinary bodies of their characters, a focus which the genre dictates. While the superhero film’s relationship to the clinical gaze varies, in recent years with the rise of television series in the Marvel/Disney+ collaboration the presentation of superheroes and villains often transcends the part-whole relationship the clinical gaze demands of the disabled body.

Considering work on another form of gaze, Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (centred around the male gaze) is an

¹⁰ One noted bodybuilder who shifted into film industry with great success was Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose most famous role as the posthuman ‘Terminator’ utilised his bodybuilding physique to emphasise his character’s ‘non-human’ status.

important touchstone for writing about films, even where most discussion centres around male characters. The majority of superhero film fans are and have long been, men: a survey done in February 2019, weeks before the release of female-led *Captain Marvel*, found that 61% of US males surveyed considered themselves 'superhero movie fans', whilst the percentage for women was 53% (Statista, 2019). The margin between genders is likely to have decreased post-2016 as the MCU moved into Phase 3 of its film series.¹¹ Superhero films are made *by* men, *for* men. Mulvey refers to Lacanian psychology on the mirror image, where the moment of recognition in the mirror is an essential step in constructing the ego. Drawing parallels between the cinema screen and the mirror, Mulvey posits that the cinema both allows 'temporary loss of ego' whilst also 'reinforcing it' (1989, pp.17-18), and this is especially true of male viewers looking upon male protagonists. The narcissism of the male-on-male gaze produces the hypermasculine figures typically seen as the protagonists in action films, including the superhero genre: consider Dwayne Johnson, a noted action film star, now the titular hero in 2022's *Black Adam*, Dave Bautista, a former WWE wrestler, now Drax the Destroyer in *Guardians of the Galaxy* and the wider MCU. As the previous section of this chapter explored, the hyperfit physique on screen has significant appeal to male viewers, who enjoy viewing the hyperfit male figure similar to when they view them in strongman and bodybuilding competitions: as a way of visualising the godlike possibilities of the human body.

The audience as a collective is an active participant and a key consideration when producing visual media such as film. Whilst a viewer is encouraged to stare, with the 'voyeuristic separation' of the darkness of the cinema versus the bright, oversaturated colours on the screen (Mulvey, 1989, p.17), the stare happens upon a world – fictional – unknowing of their viewer. The relationship between the audience member and the superhero film is unique – not only does the film, as Mulvey says, 'satisf[y] a primordial wish for

¹¹ This phase begins with *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and concludes with 2019's *Spider-Man: Far From Home*.

pleasurable looking' (1989, p.17), with its hyper-attractive actors and extraordinary bodies (including the alien), but it immensely satisfies the complex process of 'likeness and difference' (1989, p.18) that both the film's stars (in undertaking their parts) and viewers perform. The male-on-male, narcissist gaze is tested when it comes to the disabled person or character. If the viewer – especially the male as discussed above – sees a superhero as a desirable person to be like, yet thinks the opposite of the disabled person, what happens when these characters are theorised to be alike, if not the same? The power of the stare (which, when watching a film, is always activated) forces the viewer to ask of the disabled (and of the superhero/villain): why does that person look or act so much like, and yet so different from, me (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.20)?

Garland-Thomson's theory of the stare in relation to disability emphasises the intensity and length of the stare when it comes to bodily difference: it is an 'interrogative gesture' through which people attempt to understand why the disabled person looks so like, and yet so different from, them (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.3). When it comes to the visibly disabled body, our attention often 'obscur[es] the personhood' (Garland-Thomson, 2009, p.20) of the person that the body belongs to. The need-to-know aspect of the extraordinary body that comes with Garland-Thomson's idea of the stare means that superhero films benefit from their fantastical state; the audience knows little about the characters and their bodies, about the science behind their powers and mutations. The superhero genre places the viewer in the position of the unknowing, and through the film teaches the viewer about the bodies and powers of the characters. As the expert, the film is able to deliver what information its producers choose to impart, and the visual format allows for examination of the characters' bodies to take place on the terms of the film crew who direct the camera.

These various theories around the gaze, look, stare of the viewer come together in this thesis to inform my discussion through the imaginary audience conceived through the perception of the normate: the male, able-bodied viewer who often makes up a majority of superhero film consumers.

The male gaze dictates that films are often made by these men, for these men, who do not film with an intended disabled audience in mind. This is essential to consider when analysing the films in this thesis, which often do not depict disability as literal, instead often functioning as metaphor.

The way that super-bodies are performed on screen enables the superhero genre to utilise soft power, which relies on ‘the ability to attract others’ (Nye, 2004, p.6) rather than coercion. By favouring a societally-desired physique, fit enough to be muscular without crossing into the ‘grotesque’ of the bodybuilder, superhero films use the familiar, constructed ideal of the superhero body (as seen in pre-*Endgame* Thor) to gain positive rapport with the audience. The establishment of this mutual understanding of how superhero bodies should be performed (i.e. the attraction of viewers), with little deviance from this pre-*Endgame*, sets a foundation for the superhero film to be a vehicle for promotion of bodily ideals. The desirability of being ‘super’ aligns the viewer with these characters. It is no coincidence that one of the first and most popular all-time superheroes is ‘Superman’, a word which originated as a translation of the Nietzschean ‘Übermensch’. Superheroes are a transhuman approximate, deemed to be both biologically and socially superior to the humans they live amongst, and it is this superiority that gives the genre soft power through the promotion of body ideals, and, as the next section will discuss, political ideologies.

Superhero Privilege and Propaganda in Capitalist Society

A consequence of examining the superhero genre is recognising that the super-person has a power accessed by people in the viewer’s world: money. Were it not for their wealth, Iron Man and Batman would never exist. Financial privilege affords Bruce Wayne his vigilante identity; as Barounis highlights, his ‘vast reserves of private capital’ (2013, p.315) enable him not just to afford custom Batsuits, weapons, and vehicles, but the research and development that goes into these. Tony Stark has his billionaire status to thank for his life. Were he unable to afford his care— several replacement

electromagnets that are implanted in his chest to stop shrapnel from tearing his heart apart— his tale would end prematurely. This is the reality for disabled people: living what able-bodied people deem a ‘normal’ life has a severe cost when you are disabled. Under the neoliberal order in the US and the ADA, which protects the disabled person’s right to work, disabled people have transitioned away from the traditionally patronising role of the ‘exceptional American’ (super crips, inspirations, overcomers), yet it can be argued that this is merely token inclusionism that has been ‘paraded’ as ‘proof’ that America is an equal society (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015, p.18).

Because we associate independence with ‘normality’, and ‘dependence’ with ‘abnormality’ (and indeed ‘disability’) (Barnes, 2000, p.452), modern American society is increasingly geared towards the able-bodied majority, and Americans who are disabled (requiring assistance through legal protections, financial aid, or physical care) are often penalised economically and socially, through financial difficulty and inability to access social capital.

Superheroes often need to be rich as a prerequisite to building their superhero identity, especially in the case of Batman and Iron Man, neither of whom have bodily changes that constitute powers (Iron Man’s electromagnet powers his suits, but on its own, it is a medical device). Because Bruce Wayne does not have to wear ‘hockey pads’ (*TDK*, 2008, 10:26-10:32) (which he suggested was the difference between his own portrayal and that of a poorer copycat Batman), and is instead able to pay for the custom armour he uses as a ‘capitalist trump card’ (Barounis, 2013, p.315), he is much more successful as a superhero, especially when he has no supernatural power to assist him. Batman and Iron Man flaunt their extravagant wealth as their power because it makes them formidable figures when fighting villains. Injuries are of little consequence, and often instead serve as indicators of where armour can be strengthened to create a much more ‘invincible’ seeming hero. The pretence at exceptionality that Batman and Iron Man each perform, being in all aspects (except financial) fairly ordinary rather than super-heroic, reflects the ‘boys club’ culture they are a part of: white, cisgender, able-bodied men are able to risk their lives being

heroes because they are considered to have societal privilege. This privilege, which is afforded to them from birth, guarantees them a foundational level of societal status which many struggle to attain throughout adulthood. Batman and Iron Man have this privilege and use it to their advantage. Their money only serves to elevate this privilege, providing them medical care, staff, and access to greater armour and weapons that in turn help them succeed in battle.

Tony Stark's financial privilege, while manifesting mainly in the form of access to 'medical' care, also provides him with a comfortable lifestyle.¹² He has personal protection in the form of a security guard, and various homes throughout the Infinity Saga (including a Malibu mansion and a high-rise building in the centre of New York City) which provide space for him to work on his Iron Man suits as well as train without the threat of homelessness or other obstacles. Tony Stark does not have the obligation that comes with having a body valued by SHIELD: he chooses to become a superhero because he can pay for access to that world. His wealth is so enormous that Stark often serves as the financier of the entire Avengers team, making him an essential asset. His societal privilege and Bruce Wayne's able body mean they can make themselves the spectacle that is the superhero. This contrasts with characters whose powers force them into the superhero/villain life, a contrast that is under discussion in Chapter two of this thesis.

The X-Men are another superhero group that benefit from the super-rich status of one of their members. They reside in the X-Mansion, also known as Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. Owned by Charles Xavier's family, the mansion was built during the mid-twentieth century and, due to the threat of nuclear war, has an expansive bunker underneath which has been later converted to a subbasement. The subbasement houses Cerebro (Xavier's machine which enhances his telepathic abilities), a laboratory, and the X-Jet Hangar. The X-Jets prove that the X-Men have elevated financial status.

¹² Here, medical is placed in inverted commas because Stark makes his assistant and later partner Pepper Potts change out his reactor, rather than a surgeon.

Since private jets are usually reserved for the wealthy, the X-Men's access to their own planes gives them an advantage: they get to operate as (and are) super-rich. Wheelchair users take significant risks simply to board a plane, as evidenced by the 29 wheelchairs destroyed or damaged by airlines every day (Riley, 2021). The fictionality of these characters offers them protection from these actual-world inconveniences or difficulties: to bypass the issue of needing to fly around the country, creative license is used to give them their own jet (for which a pilot does not need to be hired – various members of the X-Men pilot the X-Jets), while to stop them needing to work to pay the cost of living, Charles Xavier is rich enough to pay for the entire team. Actual-world considerations like these are often detractions from the plot of superhero films, the viewers of which do not care for the explanation of how everyone funds their lives.

The comic books on which the film adaptations are based are heavily tied to the politics of the twentieth century and can be read as propaganda biased towards the USA, a bias extended with the twenty-first-century move to the screen.¹³ Many MCU films for example use authentic props (such as planes) provided by the US Department of Defense (DoD). Secker (2019) writes that, without the support of the Pentagon, the MCU may not have become the world's biggest film franchise. The US Air Force provided access to the Edwards Air Force base in California, as well as 'a billion dollars' worth of planes' (Secker, 2019) for *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*. Stark Industries, which Tony Stark takes over from his father, produces weapons for the military until Stark himself ceases production, haunted after seeing the impact of his weapons first-hand. Military officials make frequent appearances in the MCU (including Rhodey, also known as War Machine, who is a member of the US Air Force), and the involvement of the US government was a key plot point in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The relationship between Marvel Studios and the DoD meant that representatives from the Pentagon reviewed the scripts for films they were involved in and revised any parts they felt did not

¹³ For further reading on the politics of comic book companies in the twentieth century, see Tegan O'Neil's article for *A. V. Club*, 'How the Cold War saved Marvel and birthed a generation of superheroes' (2016).

represent the US military as they preferred to be shown (Secker, 2019). These films, therefore, function on an implicit level as a form of modern propaganda for the US military, promoting a pro-US point of view.¹⁴

The relationship between Marvel Studios and the US military broke down during production of *The Avengers* (2012) when it became clear that the Avengers and SHIELD did not have to work alongside the fictional US military. The military refused to be depicted as subordinates to the superheroes. Between *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), the US military had little involvement with the MCU. They joined forces with Marvel again in 2019, with the eponymous Captain Marvel (earth name Carol Danvers) being a US Air Force pilot. This film was even used to promote young women joining the Air Force, and this campaign came under fire for using Captain Marvel's feminist credentials as a 'trojan horse for militarism' (Secker, 2019).



American Nationalism, Militarism, and Captain America

When it comes to discussing the body in superhero films, there is one hero who the DoD see as a shining representation of their values: Captain America. Steve Rogers starts off his narrative arc desperate to join the US Army and serve during the Second World War, but although he is initially ruled out on medical grounds, his passion for his country is

Figure 2: Promotional poster for *Captain America: the First Avenger* (2011)

¹⁴ An approximate list of Marvel films that the DoD was involved in is as follows: *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Captain Marvel* (2019).

overwhelming. The DoD was keen to be involved, calling Captain America someone who ‘possesses the values of today’s American Soldier’ (Secker, 2019). While he is one of the most beloved superheroes, he is also the fiercest example of American propaganda; he literally has ‘America’ in his name and fights in a suit that plays on the classic stars-and-stripes. The poster for *The First Avenger* had the US flag waving in the background (see fig. 2). If Captain Marvel is the trojan horse for militarism (Secker, 2019), Captain America is the atomic bomb. Relating a fictional superhero to a real-world country so blatantly can cause significant complications; for example, many would have strong opinions (both for and against) about a display of nationalism during significant American controversies, such as the Trump presidency or the Black Lives Matter protests. It is no surprise that these are actual-world elements that Marvel chose not to bring into the MCU (instead, the film’s President is fictional and revealed to not be of any political leaning). Captain America’s comic origins do however focus on the actual-world background: creators Jack Kirby and Joe Simon came from Jewish families, and amid the Second World War saw in Adolf Hitler ‘a believable “supervillain”’ (Dittmer, 2013, p.9). Captain America’s first issue saw him punching Hitler in the face on the cover, a move recreated in *The First Avenger* as part of Steve’s promotional tour, where he promoted the US war effort and acted in shows for soldiers’ entertainment. Though the film chooses to use fictional villains as its antagonists, the creation of Captain America as an overtly patriotic response to a real-life genocidal dictator played on the human need to relate to, and disconnect from, others.

Americans were automatically on Captain America’s side; the other option



was the Nazis. Such an explicit binary between Captain America and the Nazis was reflective of Kirby and Simon’s motives in creating

him. For a while, he was the hero they

Figure 3: A man refusing to salute to Hitler (Macias, 2015, original unknown)

needed: introduced before Americans would join the Allies and officially enter the war, Steve Rogers, post-serum, was the epitome of the ideal American.

An American setting has long been integral to the comic-book genre. There were few other countries in the 1940s (and indeed in contemporary times) who could feasibly function as a superpower and intervene in international crises like the US could and did. In *The Avengers* (2012), Thor's brother Loki (the god of mischief who aspires to take over Earth) ends up in Stuttgart, Germany, and commands the crowd before him to kneel. An old man in the crowd refuses, drawing obvious parallels to the 1936 photograph of a solitary man refusing to salute Hitler, surrounded by a crowd in which others have their arms raised (see fig. 3). After the old man points out that there have always been 'men like [Loki]' (*The Avengers*, 2012, 40:45-41:07), another obvious reference to Hitler, Captain America appears just in time to save him. Again, Rogers is saving people from a would-be dictator (in Germany) while looking like a walking advertisement for the USA. It is a powerful statement that takes inspiration from the comics' Jewish writers: Captain America's body is used as a physical embodiment of the idealised American patriot. From his stars and stripes outfit to him sacrificing his life (or so he thinks) to save New York at the end of *The First Avenger*, the changes Rogers' body undergoes are a physical manifestation of his overall narrative. Emotionally, his seventy-year cryostasis, flying a plane into Arctic ice in 1945 and awaking in 2011, removes his desire for a normal life. As he says at the end of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* 'family...stability...the guy who wanted all that went in the ice 75 years ago. I think someone else came out' (2015, 2:10:01-2:10:12). As I will explore further in Chapter Two, personal attachments are often sacrificed for the superhero life. Ultimately, what makes Steve Rogers fully assume the role of Captain America is being frozen for seventy years; he awakes knowing no one, having lost the woman he loved and all his friends who presumably grew old and died without him. In the twenty-first century, using his body to fight rather than just dancing and acting in shows for American troops on the promotional

tour, Steve has never been more of a propaganda symbol for American nationalism.¹⁵

The super-soldier serum that Dr Erskine (a German scientist who now works for the Americans) administers to Steve is also used by the film's main antagonist Johann Schmidt, also known by the sobriquet Red Skull. Schmidt believes he is an Übermensch, yet still takes the serum because he wants his body to match his perceived image of himself. However, the serum is not ready to be used and instead he becomes disfigured and no longer looks human; as his name suggests, his head comes to resemble a large, red skull. His skin is pulled tight over his facial bones and his eyes are extremely sunken. As a result, he spends most of *The First Avenger* wearing a mask designed to mimic his previous face. Schmidt remarks in one scene (while wearing his mask) that he 'no longer reflects [Hitler's] image of Aryan perfection' (*The First Avenger*, 2011, 43:20-43:24). This is given as a reason for him being exiled, having grown beyond control of the Nazis and become a threat rather than an asset. The fact that the super-serum disfigures Schmidt while giving Rogers the idealised Aryan body is no coincidence. As I will discuss further in Chapter Two, disfigurement is often a necessary point in creating a villain's narrative arc in superhero narratives. Heroes are more likely to grapple with disability as a metaphor (in the form of powers) that rarely affects their appearance negatively as it does for villains. Rogers' experiment pays off. Schmidt's does not.

Human experimentation on both sides (hero and villain) comes to play a role in 2015's *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, when Steve, alongside the Avengers, faces off against Pietro and Wanda Maximoff, Sokovian siblings who were voluntarily experimented on by Hydra, causing super-speed and telekinesis respectively.¹⁶ Unlike Schmidt's experimentation, the Maximoffs do not

¹⁵ America's admiration of Steve Rogers is so rampant that it is revealed in the Disney+ series *Hawkeye* that he even has his own Broadway musical: *Rogers: The Musical*.

¹⁶ Hydra, which started as a scientific research division under the Nazi Party, features throughout the MCU as a covert terrorist organisation. Hydra is led by Johann Schmidt in *The First Avenger* (2011) and becomes a recurring antagonist in the MCU. Like the Nazis, Hydra scientists were recruited by SHIELD as part of Operation Paperclip (an actual-world event where the US hired over 2,200 Germans with a view to paying them for their expertise shown in WW2). Hydra then rebuilt itself inside SHIELD, before being exposed in *The Winter*

become disfigured: part-way through the film they switch sides and join the Avengers, becoming heroes (a status which, as this thesis will explore, would be negated by disfigurements). Before that, Steve and SHIELD agent Maria Hill have the following exchange about the Maximoffs (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015, 15:40-15:54):

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

Steve Rogers: Right. What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them in order to protect their country?

Maria Hill: We're not at war, Captain.

Steve Rogers: They are.

Hill's hypocrisy is unsurprising, given the MCU's tendency to adopt one rule for the heroes, and another for the villains. *Age of Ultron*, however, is the first instance in which this is called out. It is no coincidence that Captain America, the *Avengers'* most explicit symbol of national pride, is the person to point out this discrepancy to Hill. Both Steve Rogers and the Maximoff twins take desperate measures to help their country (Sokovia was attacked by weapons designed by Stark Industries, which killed the Maximoffs' parents), but one (Rogers) fights for a first world power, the US, and thereby is held as an ideal. Neither Wanda nor Pietro becomes 'Captain Sokovia'. Yet their perception of threat to their lives and country (having been bombed and experienced significant trauma) leads them down the same path as Steve. Hill does not consider them to be at war, because she is part of the US superpower, and Sokovia is such a small nation that they are not a threat.¹⁷ Steve however understands the Maximoffs' reasoning: when under considerable personal threat and pressure, many would do whatever needed to help their country. This explains why Rogers is described by the DoD as

Soldier (2014). Before their eventual defeat, they were written to have had significant influence in world events, including causing the Cold War.

¹⁷ Here the term 'superpower' is used in the sense of a state which holds a dominant international position and can exert power and influence on a global scale.

‘possess[ing] the values of today’s [...] Soldier’ (Secker, 2019) – the Maximoffs are not given this actual-world status because they fight for the ‘wrong’ side.

Overt displays of patriotism are especially important when considering Captain America’s body within his origins. The visuality of the film format, especially one as popular as the superhero genre, means that bodies carry a great deal of meaning. Their subtleties, to an audience who interpret them, can communicate ideologies on a social and political level. Whether it be their actions, presentation, or, as the next chapter will discuss, their origin, the super-body as a metaphor for disability is one of the most prominent that we have in contemporary popular culture. Its use as a vessel for propaganda identifies the superhero as a societal figure with significant actual-world influence, and, as we will see in the next chapter, the politico-historical roots of characters such as Captain America and Magneto ground the superhero genre in a meaning-rich context both in and out of the actual-world.

Chapter 1. Origins

Requirements of Origins in Disability Stories

Disability has been well-documented by critical disability theorists as ‘demand[ing] a story’ (Bérubé, 2005, p.570): able-bodied people desire to know the secrets of *why* and *how* and *when* someone became disabled. Davis writes that disability is ‘always associate[d]’ with a narrative; the story of how they ‘became’ disabled can also be part of the ‘sentimentali[sation]’ (1995, p.3) of the person who has the disability. The act of repeatedly having to account for one’s markedly disabled body is, as Couser writes, a ‘social burden’ (2005a, p.604), an act of labour by the disabled person to ‘relieve the auditors’ discomfort’ (Couser, 2005b, p.19) when faced with a bodily difference. Disabilities are frequently used as plot points in narratives because the ‘unknowability’ of the disabled body ‘consolidates the *need*’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.6, emphasis mine) to share the narrative behind it.

What better format than the comic-book movie to explore actual-world disability? Accounting for someone’s disability (power) or disfigurement is a key trope of the comic-book narrative, better known as the origin story. Drawn from both science and ‘more fantastical sources of magic, myth, and legend’ (Locke, 2005, p.31), the origin story of the comic-book character is a frequent feature of almost all comic-book media, from the source comic books to film adaptations. Origin stories are where the ‘core identity’ (Flanagan et al., 2017, p.14) of the hero or villain lie: they shape their entire narrative arc, and, if focus becomes lost, the origin story can serve as a ‘baseline reference for a true interpretation’ (Flanagan et al., 2017, p.14) of the character. If narrative prosthesis (Mitchell and Snyder) states that disabled characters in narratives often only exist so their disability can further the plot in some way, becoming super serves as an extreme manifestation of this. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that most disabled characters are ‘enveloped’ (1997, p.10) by the otherness that their disability highlights in

their texts, and superheroes and supervillains are no different. They must be enveloped by their otherness because the superhero genre demands that their disability/powers be a key focal point.

Through analysis of Tony Stark, Wolverine, Captain America, the *X-Men* series, Spider-Man, and two iterations of the Joker (Joaquin Phoenix in 2019's *Joker* and Heath Ledger in 2008's *TDK*), this chapter will compare the super origin story with that of the disability origin story: like being disabled, being super also often requires or produces a story. It will argue that the origin story is one of the most crucial parts of the disability metaphor that underpins the superhero genre. Building to discussions of the Joker in *TDK*, a character who actively shuns the trope of the origin story, the chapter will explore how the origin story for both heroes and villains is a fictionalised version of the need to know the origin of disability. The emergence of both disability and superpowers is a marked event in the life of those who experience them: superhero narratives are often marked by the 'before' and 'after' of the emergence of their powers, the moment at which they go from 'normal' to extraordinary; to, as this thesis posits, a disability metaphor.

One stereotype of disability is that it can be the 'gateway to special abilities' (Siebers, 2008, p.10). By turning what many would consider to be a horrifying event (being bitten by a radioactive spider, being held captive by a terrorist organisation, being experimented on by scientists) into an 'advantage' (Siebers, 2008, p.10), superheroes perform the supercrip narrative.¹⁸ The supercrip, a stereotype of a disabled person, is defined as the 'inspirational' disabled person, who 'proves' themselves capable of 'overcoming' their disability through 'extraordinary feats' (Shapiro, 1993, [no pagination]). In the fictional universe of the superhero, however, there are significantly fewer limits to acts disabled or disfigured people can perform. The superhero is quite literally extraordinary, crossing the boundary of the limits of what the human can do, but they often struggle to avoid letting their powers define them. Regardless, the superhero's acceptance of their new

¹⁸ I am referring to the respective origin stories of Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Captain America (among many characters who begin as a scientific experimentation).

body - most superheroes, like many disabled people, 'become' their extraordinary selves (Garland-Thomson, 2014, [no pagination]) rather than being born that way - and their embracing of the superhero identity converts them to the supercrip narrative. Modern supercrip narratives feature disabled people 'performing feats that the non-disabled viewer cannot imagine doing' (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.60), the visual rhetoric of wonder being 'the oldest mode' (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p.59) of disability representation on film.

Sami Schalk writes that the superpowered supercrip narrative differs from other supercrip narratives as the character becomes exceptional because of their 'extraordinary powers and abilities *alone*' (2016, p.81, emphasis mine), powers which are the result of accidents or luck, rather than effort. Rarely does the superhero face actual-world disabilities because of the events of their origins; instead, their potentially disabling incidents differ largely from the actual-world by giving them powers instead. For heroes, the events are rarely presented as upsetting: Captain America's experiment, though he undergoes significant physical stress (he screams throughout), is a testament to his dedication and psychological strength. Importantly, he undergoes a temporary pain to gain his superhero body.

Alaniz elaborates further on how superpowers tend to overcompensate for any physical difference or disability for the hero, saying that the power 'banish[es the disability] to the realm of the invisible', replacing it with 'raw power' in a 'hyper-masculine' fashion (2014, p.36). Real-world disabilities are often compensated for by being 'solved' (Hsy, 2015, p.28) through flashbacks to before disablement (notably in the case of *X-Men*'s Charles Xavier) or powers that change how the body is used.

Villains are less fortunate. Often, they form the 'disfigured' element of this thesis' title, bearing visible scars or disabilities that have a profoundly negative impact on their lives, often serving as motivation for their evil deeds. If the villain embodied the supercrip just as the hero does, it would defeat the super element; instead, they typically have a markedly evil appearance in the form of scars or other disfigurements. This chapter will explore disfigurement

and disability as moral markers and propose that the moments in comic book films when the characters go from 'normal' to 'super' (the origin story) is also a moment in which the metaphor for disability emerges at its strongest. The origin of powers and disfigurements is often a required starting point when introducing a comic-book character on screen. Instituting the shift from 'the ordinary to the extra-ordinary' (Locke, 2005, p.32), the moment at which a character gains the disabilities or disfigurements that form the core of their super-identity is typically part of a film's first act, as we follow the protagonist (hero) going from ordinary to extra-ordinary. Sheehan writes that when the unnatural and uncanny are introduced into human corporeality, the 'monstrous, mythic' body functions as a critique of science and 'scientific naturalism' (2015, p.248). Origin stories defy scientific naturalism; there is no biological explanation for how someone bitten by a spider gains spider-like powers, for example. Though many comic-book films are set on Earth, the genre demands that the audience forget actual-world science and accept what the origin story tells them at face value. The origin story (like the story of becoming disabled) must fulfil two needs: the need to know the events that created the super-being, and the need to know enough about how these events affected the body to not need to question it further.

What do origin stories teach us about how super-beings are created in comic-book films? To quote from the Joker in his comic-book origin story, 1988's *The Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland):

Ladies and Gentlemen, you've read about it in the newspapers, now, shudder as you observe, before your very eyes, that rarest and tragic of nature's mistakes: I give you the average man.

The most terrifying thing, as the Joker says, is to be average in a world full of supernatural beings. Nick Fury, who leads SHIELD throughout the MCU films, sports an eye patch and reveals little about his injured eye. Fury deliberately chooses his language to hide that his eye was scratched by a Flerken (which, for comedic purposes, resembles an Earth cat). Fury, in a twist from actual-world customs, compensates for his normal body (he has

no powers and no special abilities save for his authority at SHIELD) by using his disability to create an air of mystery and status for himself. By alluding to a more extra-ordinary story, leading his peers to assume a version of events that they deem an 'acceptable' origin, Fury retains the respect his injury commands.

Although Fury's origin remained a mystery until 2019's *Captain Marvel*, a key part of the origin story is, I argue, the films answering the question of what disability literally looks like in the fictional context of aliens and superpowers. Moments where the body is undressed, whether it be topless moments for male characters (see fig. 1) or in this case where the eyepatch (which functions to signpost disability while not showing it in full) is removed, serve as a designated staring moment. Scriptwriters add explicit reference to the extraordinary body, alongside the extraordinary origin story, because we find the extraordinary fascinating. Disability is a common way to draw the eye, to maintain the interest in, say, a long-running cinematic universe: audience members are attracted to the promise of more extraordinary bodies, of getting to stare at these bodies and how they behave in a safe space where the actors cannot possibly engage back with the viewer.

Untangling Humanism, Transhumanism, and Posthumanism

When looking at superhero films (which often present bodies with technological adaptations such as cybernetic arms alongside unusual flesh bodies and alien humanoids), the unknown is a common narrative feature that is to be made known to the viewer through the process of the origin story. It is necessary to unpack the complex concepts of humanism, transhumanism, and posthumanism, especially in the superhero film genre: the worlds presented in superhero films are often technologically advanced compared to that which the viewers inhabit, leading to the expansion of the boundaries of the human.

Humanism, which places the human at the centre of the world, focuses on the individual, '*the human*' who displays the rationality, autonomy, self-

consciousness, coherence, and self-determination that makes them the human (Nayar, 2013, p.16, emphasis mine). Transhumanism acts as an 'intensification of humanism' (Wolfe, 2010, p.xv), acknowledging the importance of the human whilst desiring to use technology to enhance the human body, so that the human may live a longer, 'better' life and therefore have more time to contribute their 'specialness' to society. Posthumanism stands as 'the opposite of transhumanism' (Wolfe, 2010, p.xv). Not contained to the boundaries of the 'who', instead favouring the 'what' (Shildrick, 2022, p.1) as it attempts to decentre anthropocentrism, posthumanism seeks to explore the 'beyond' of the extension of boundaries (Murray, 2020, p.12) past the human, and in doing so functions as a critique of humanism and transhumanism's intense focus on the importance of the human. In our neoliberal Anthropocene, even the most optimistic ideas set out by transhumanists, especially the lengthening of life, can be 'unwelcome and unsettling' to many posthumanists, who would prefer to move beyond the 'dimensions of *human* life' (Shildrick, 2022, p.1, emphasis mine).

In the superhero film, ideas around trans/post/humanism are always hiding in plain sight to be engaged with. Many superheroes can be classed as popular culture examples of cyborgs; a term that requires some unpacking. Donna Haraway writes in her essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto' that, when looking at the idea of the cyborg through a gender studies lens, ideas of transcending boundaries are key to the cyborg identity – not only boundaries of the machine/flesh body, but also those of gender and culture. Though this thesis deals primarily with the idea of the cyborg as one that explores boundaries of technology working with flesh, the superhero in their origin story also becomes a cultural cyborg, neither human nor god, but holding a special, individualised status that is characteristic of the transhuman view.

Transhumanism intersects with the superhero in complex ways as a common sci-fi feature: characters with bodily enhancements are often placed at special status, individualised as the only one who can save the world in a reflection of the transhumanist-humanist idea that humans are the most special and the most important.

Haraway's question, 'why should we end at the skin?' (2016, p.61), has provided a starting point for many trans/post/humanist theorists, including Margrit Shildrick, who writes that, in the extended context of prostheses, this question finds particular significance (2022, p.6). There has long been a gap in posthumanism scholarship in which disability could have, and thanks in part to Stuart Murray's 2020 monograph *Disability and the Posthuman*, does fit deftly. The relationship between disability and ideas surrounding technology and the cyborg, which fall under the umbrella of trans/post/humanisms, has long been tricky to navigate: Murray writes that many debates about the posthuman, while appearing abstract and theoretical, can find an actual-world context in the disabled community; even in those who choose not to use technologies the 'philosophical speculation and biopolitical contexts' with which posthumanism engages are rich sources of thought (2020, p.23). One major debate comes with transhumanist perspectives is that although transhumanism places humans as special and important beings (therefore deserving of bodily 'enhancements'), it continues the outdated idea that disability is something to be eradicated as an imperfection in the pursuit of an 'improved' body. The intersection of transhumanism with science and technology often excludes disabled voices from the conversation and perpetuates the medical model of disability by seeking to make disability a thing of the past, placing it as something to be cured in the name of enhancement (Murray, 2020, p.23).

Stories in which the world is reimagined can therefore be examined in trans/post/humanist lenses. Tony Stark's chest implant will be examined in detail in this chapter, but the superhero genre contains a plethora of material that could give trans/post/humanisms its own chapter: Stark's artificial intelligence personal assistants J.A.R.V.I.S. (later transplanted into a humanoid body and renamed Vision) and F.R.I.D.A.Y., *Guardians of the Galaxy's* tree-like creature Groot, the Hulk who Bruce Banner transforms into in moments of anger (and in doing so loses his human-like qualities of rational thought and autonomy), to name but a few examples. The human in superhero films is often relegated to side character status in favour of extra-

terrestrial beings and/or those with supernatural abilities, which may be considered to make them non-human. The stories of how this non-human status came to be, or how it looks and functions, forms the basis of the 'need' for origin stories (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.6), both disability and superhero.

Perceiving Disability: Tony Stark's Arc Reactor as Prosthesis

Origin stories must also serve to be satisfying to the viewer. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues in relation to the social management of disability (2014), people become disabled when they exhibit characteristics of their disability in a 'perceptible way' in the social environment. Disability must be 'recognized' (Garland-Thomson, 2014, [no pagination]) to be fully embodied, implying a relationship not only with the self but with society.

Disability can therefore often be easier to keep hidden. Socially, the benefits of hiding disability are clear: when disability is unveiled, it can elicit pity, horror, and shame from the starrer. It creates an invisible barrier of disadvantage. Denying disability's presence is therefore not uncommon in narrative. As Siebers writes, many think that 'the lesser the ability, the lesser the human being' (2008, p.10), so if disability could be hidden, many would take the opportunity to appear 'normal'. Tony Stark is one superhero who few audience members and fictional peers consider to be disabled because while his disability has a visible marker (his chest arc-reactor), its use in facilitating his super-suit makes secondary its status as a life-saving medical device. Having been kidnapped by a terrorist group in Afghanistan, Tony undergoes life-saving surgery after shrapnel from a Stark Industries missile (fired by the terrorist group) becomes lodged in his chest, dangerously close to his heart. The result is that he has an electromagnet, known as an arc reactor, in his chest (see fig. 4), which is partially emerged so that it can be changed out frequently, as it often overheats and becomes toxic.



Figure 4: Tony Stark and his assistant Pepper Potts changing out his arc reactor (*Iron Man*, 2008).

This emergency surgery and its results are spun by Tony as an opportunity for prosperity when he is rescued and back in the USA, where he has access to his privilege and wealth once more. The electromagnet is quickly traded in for an arc reactor that works in tandem with his Iron Man super-suits, taking Tony from a man reliant on a machine to a *The Six Million Dollar Man*-style, twenty-first-century cyborg. More specifically, as Susan Smith writes, Tony's Iron Man persona fulfils the sci-fi trope of the 'cyborg soldier' (2016, p.260), embodying contemporary military technoscientific discourse, a twist on his origin story. By being injured by a Stark-made weapon, Tony Stark himself *becomes* a weapon, shutting down the branch of Stark Industries that creates weapons at the end of *Iron Man* (2008) and focussing on his supersuits. He desires to escape the 'imperfections of [his body] through the coding of [his body] as [a problem] in need of solutions' (Masters, 2005, p.114). His creation of Iron Man seeks to overcome his newfound disability in a common disability trope: turning a negative experience (being kidnapped, injured, crudely operated on) into a positive one by becoming a superhero. A running joke throughout the films is that Tony Stark does not have a heart: this metaphor refers to his casual apathy, callousness, and hedonism frequently showed in the film series. His injury therefore provides proof of his physical heart, something Pepper Potts, his assistant and later wife, jokes about by gifting Stark his original arc reactor inscribed with the words 'proof that Tony Stark has a heart' at the end of 2008's *Iron Man*. The heart

holds great significance: beyond its literal usage for pumping blood around our bodies, metaphorically the heart is often positioned as the centre of life. Holding resonance as a 'feeling organ' (Bound Alberti, 2010, p.3), the heart is not only what keeps us alive, but also what makes us human: without the emotional depth and warmth that the heart metaphorically gives us, we would lose our humanity. Especially in Stark's case, nothing denotes a lack of humanity more than not having a heart (Murray, 2020).¹⁹ While the heart can be recreated or replaced, a lack of what society deems suitable emotions cannot always be fixed so easily: it is a far harder and longer process to fix Tony's 'cold heart', for example, compared to the shrapnel that physically threatens his heart.

Humanism is a key proponent of the hero persona, though this becomes sticky when dealing with the disability metaphor because of the relationship between disability and humanity. The disabled body is 'to be feared within classic configurations of "the human"' (Murray, 2020, p.11). Nonconforming bodies such as that of the superhero also transcend the boundaries of the human. Tony Stark, however, was an antihuman, cynical character before his transformation into Iron Man. Having metaphorically heartless humans become superheroes offers them a redemption of sorts: disability acts as the bridge to a role where they can find emotional wholeness (by helping others, finding a family, saving the world). In light of humanism, disability in the cases of antihuman superheroes serves to correct a personality flaw.

To fully be a superhero, Stark has to work with his arc reactor, which both serves as proof he has a heart and a device that, narratively, fixes his lack of emotion and altruism by facilitating the development of these values, a quality in which discussions of the heart are heavily rooted. The closer to the heart something is, the more important it is: Stark's arc reactor, and in turn his Iron Man identity, is therefore paramount. His disability transformation

¹⁹ Stuart Murray examines the earlier narrative of the Tin Woodman in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a posthumanist character who, despite lacking a physical heart, discovers his metaphorical heart is maintained through his actions (2020).

goes far beyond the physical: the greatest change is in his personality (which has been seen to alter in cases of heart transplants [Bound Alberti, 2010]). Having been injured by a Stark Industries weapon, Tony's trauma serves to remind him 'of the fragility of existence' (Stefanopoulou, 2017, p.29). Shrapnel from a weapon developed by his family company lays at the centre of his body: in the face of the destruction his weapons can cause, Stark shuts down all weapons operations at Stark Industries. At the conclusion of *Iron Man 3*, recognising that his Iron Man suits have again become a weapon, Tony has them all destroyed. He undergoes surgery to remove the shrapnel, thus rendering the arc reactor unnecessary and 'overcoming' his disability. Reflecting on his super-identity in the wake of destroying the suits and removing his arc reactor, Stark says, 'my armour was a cocoon... and now I am a changed man' (*Iron Man 3*, 2013, 1:59:02-1:59:40). The idea of the exoskeleton suits as a cocoon to facilitate change plays into the narrative that disability can act as a catalyst for positive change.

Tony Stark is the unlikely man: the one that proves that you can wake up one day able-bodied, and the next disabled. He refuses to let his disability mark him because he often refuses to think of himself as disabled at all. One of the key reasons he burns through his arc reactors so quickly is because he uses them with his super-suit. He sacrifices power in his life-saving medical device so he can be Iron Man. One of the only moments that he self-identifies as disabled is in court when he uses the disabled identity as an advantage to try and keep his super-suit from being handed over to the US government. If his suit was defined as a weapon, it would require regulation; therefore, Tony chooses to call it a 'high-tech prosthesis' (*Iron Man 2*, 2010, 11:18-11:41). This is an example of appropriation: while thinking of the super-suit as a form of prosthesis can be powerful, here Stark exploits this for his personal gain.

Siebers writes that 'nondisabled people have the right to choose when to be able-bodied' (2008, p.10), and although I label Tony Stark as disabled, he himself does not outside of this scene: he has the choice of whether to access the disabled identity and he manipulates this to his own gain.

Prosthetic devices can be assistive to the disabled person, but they also function to be 'signifiers of bodily difference', 'interrupt[ing]' the normal body (Germaine, 2016, [no pagination]). Tony Stark's arc reactor, which glows and therefore shows through clothing, visibly marks him as different. More than just a badge, the arc reactor is implanted to reach deep in his chest cavity, acting as a transhumanist organ inextricable from Stark's flesh body. In the twenty-first century, prosthetics move beyond previous ideas surrounding compensating for a lack in the body, and instead, especially in the case of Stark who uses his prosthesis to facilitate his super-identity, represent the 'infinite possibilities' for 'transforming the human form' (Fahn, 2020, p.11). Tony Stark's narrative, becoming disabled and super, alongside finding a family in the Avengers, culminates in his self-sacrifice in 2019's *Endgame*. As he dies, his wife Pepper Potts puts her hand over Tony's arc reactor, in place of his heart, and at the moment of death, the arc reactor, now an external device, simultaneously powers down, dimming to represent that it has died with Stark (2:33:16-2:34:14). When Stark becomes Iron Man, he changes the associations of the arc reactor (his disability and his prosthesis) into new, humanist ones: when people see the arc reactor, they think of Iron Man, the super suits, the master engineer who built them. Mitchell et al. write that, in the wake of the posthumanist disability studies movement, the medical and social models of disability 'tend to empty disability materiality of its active participation in fashioning alternative biologies, alternative subjectivities, and viable nonnormative modes of life' (2019, p.2). In this way, Tony Stark is a disability-positive portrayal: he takes his injury and uses it as a starting point to create his Iron Man suits, which are later used by Rhodey/War Machine, Stark's friend, as an exoskeleton to facilitate walking after he is paralysed in an accident in 2016's *Civil War*. While the films give him credit for his talent at engineering and building these suits, the connection to his disability as a catalyst for this is not explicitly made, even though were it not for his emergency surgery and electromagnet implant, Stark would never need to explore these 'alternative biologies, alternative subjectivities, and viable nonnormative modes of life' (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.2). Being disabled acts as a crux for Stark to solve not only his disability

problem (how he can make his disability work for him, which sparks the creation of Iron Man the superhero) but also his emotional inhibitions, when he embraces his found-family, the Avengers. Iron Man is Tony Stark's chosen method of escapism: by disguising his disability as a superpower, he can change the perception of himself and retain the privilege being able-bodied afforded him. In his death, however, he is unable to extricate himself from his created identity: his final words mimic those in 2008's *Iron Man* as he asserts: 'I am Iron Man'.

The Need to Know: X-Men Origins: Wolverine

While many characters have an origin story plotline within their first appearance in the superhero genre, few have a film fully dedicated to it. While the title of 2009's *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* suggested that there may be more *X-Men Origins* films to follow, *Wolverine* was the only one to come to fruition.²⁰ Unlike with the Avengers, a similar superhero team within the MCU, solo X-Men films are a rare occurrence: *Wolverine* had his own trilogy, with *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, 2013's *The Wolverine*, and 2017's *Logan*, while *Deadpool*'s solo films, considered part of the *X-Men* series, act as spinoffs. 2019's *Dark Phoenix*, which centred around Jean Grey's transformation into the Phoenix, was a box office bomb. *Wolverine* also received less favourable reviews compared to its two sequels, indicating that in the case of the *X-Men* franchise, focusing on telling the origin story of a single character from a team of mutants was not what audiences nor critics wanted to see.

Wolverine begins by establishing that Logan has been through many traumatic events: from seeing his apparent father killed, to killing the man who is revealed to be his biological father (moments later, in the first eruption of his bone claws), to fighting in four wars (the American Civil War, World War I and II, and the Vietnam War), to being executed by firing squad (which

²⁰ An *X-Men Origins: Magneto* film was in production but the storyline was absorbed into the 2011 main-series film *X-Men: First Class*, having been 'superseded' by *First Class* (Kit, 2009).

fails because of his immortality).²¹ The barrage of pain does not seem to stop him from fighting, nor does it dissuade him from it: Kavadlo writes that with the trauma of the X-Men characters, it is ‘as if their psyches all have their own version of mutant healing powers’ (2009, p.44). Logan’s immortality and healing abilities do not mean that he does not feel pain, both physical and emotional. Every time his claws protrude from between his knuckles, the roots move through his forearm bones, and the sharp ends break through his skin, causing him significant pain. For Wolverine especially, being a superhero does not come without pain. While his claws start out as bone, an extension of his skeleton, the primary origin story the audience sees in *Wolverine* is the physical one: how his claws and indeed his whole skeleton become fused with adamantium, a near indestructible metal. He agrees to undergo this procedure in the wake of the (supposed) murder of the woman he loves, by his half-brother Victor, after realising he is not strong enough to defeat him. Major Stryker (the military scientist who Logan worked for prior to the procedure) tells him, ‘you will suffer more pain than any man can endure, but you will have your revenge’ (*Wolverine*, 2009, 37:29-37:35). While Stryker at first seems to care for Logan’s wellbeing during the procedure, it is clear throughout the scene that Logan is being used as a human experiment:

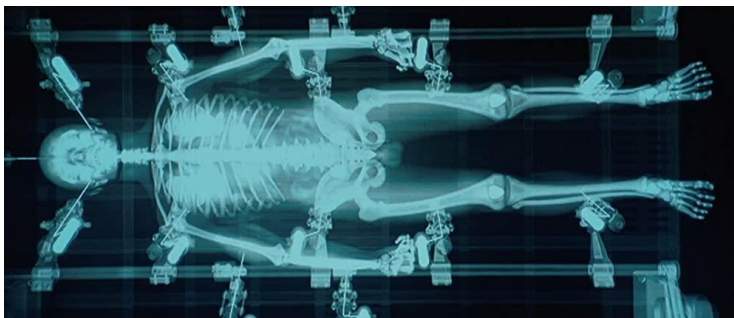


Figure 5: Logan's skeleton during the adamantium fusion (*Wolverine*, 2009)

shots of Logan are interspersed with that of a heart monitor as well as an x-ray view of the needles piercing his skeleton (see fig. 5).

²¹ It is important to note that Logan is being executed here alongside his half-brother Victor (who has similar wolverine powers and eventually acts as the film’s main villain) after Victor attempted to rape a Vietnamese woman, killing an officer who tried to stop him. Logan is notably absent until Victor is apprehended, when Logan appears and draws his claws ready to defend his brother. Sexual violence is rarely, if ever, alluded to in the superhero genre, an often-unspoken taboo that transcends the family-friendly forms of violence that the industry deems acceptable. The implicitness of the attempted rape in contrast to the heavy violence throughout the film (including several people being shot, stabbed by claws, and killed) establishes a line that both 20th Century Fox and Logan refuse to cross, aligning their values and placing Victor as the villain where Logan’s violence is justified as necessary.

Stryker's words to Logan just before the procedure, when he says, 'we're going to make you indestructible, but first we'll have to destroy you' (*Wolverine*, 2009, 38:46-38:51), are of paramount importance when analysing how Logan changes post-adamantium. The first 'you' he says refers to Wolverine the fighter, the second 'you' to Logan the man. Stryker then goes on to refer to Logan only as 'weapon X', denying him his name and stripping him of his individuality. Wolverine becomes a transhuman creation, transcending the typical human with his advanced healing, speed, stamina, and his adamantium skeleton. Stryker's final step to complete this process is to wipe Logan's memory, destroying him as a man and completing his transformation into a weapon.

Though Stryker fails to wipe his memory, Logan still transcends into the transhuman. His body easily accepts the change: a doctor tells Stryker there has been 'no rejection' of the adamantium, using the language of transplantation to further the transhumanist narrative. He flatlines as the procedure finishes, signifying the death of his old self and the birth of the Wolverine the viewers know from *X-Men* and *X2*. The stopping of the heart is an appropriate gesture for a character who, much like Tony Stark, is noted for his callous and brooding personality. While the transitory period of the adamantium settling into his skeleton has created the transhuman body, this in turn (through metaphoric use of the heart to signify emotion and morality) is part of the process in heightening his antihuman psyche, a process which is stopped when Logan prevents his memory being wiped. Logan regains consciousness when Stryker mentions wiping his memory and immediately fights to escape. His emotions, primarily pain and trauma, while haunting, separate him from his brother Victor who is a violent sadist. While Logan has gained this transhuman body, Victor naturally has the mind Stryker wanted in creating a weapon: antihuman in having no emotion or empathy, and therefore the perfect weapon. Logan knows that to maintain his humanity he must continue to endure his psychological pain and not have his memory wiped. While Wolverine can heal from physical injury, he still feels the intense pain that comes with being shot, stabbed, and beaten (injuries he

endures countless times throughout the *X-Men* franchise). By enduring constant and intense physical and mental suffering, Logan embodies the same 'extreme model of hypermasculinity' that the superhero represents (Brown, 2013, p.269). He soldiers on, healing physically from tangible wounds but often ignoring psychological ones. Logan's adamantium skeleton makes for an apt metaphor for Logan the man: he develops an impenetrable exterior that protects the man inside (his emotions and pain) from hurt, healing over to avoid long-term suffering.

The case studies of Tony Stark and Logan, with their heart and skeleton, both contain important ideas surrounding how audiences interact with origin stories on screen. Logan's is nonchronological, coming after his character has already been introduced, Stark's is the opener of his first film. With *Iron Man* being the earliest of the two films, released in 2008 (*Wolverine* was released in 2011), it is indicated here that audiences wanted to know the origins and disabilities of already established characters, leading producers to retcon and provide explicit clarity in later films. As the 'core identity' (Flanagan et al., 2017, p.14) of the character, the retcon of the origin story is used to provide important clarification for the personality traits of both characters. Logan is cold and distant from his teammates, unwilling at first to accept what will become his found-family. These personality traits are justified, retconned through either the portrayal of the origin story or references to it, by the emergence of disability. Most super-people are not born that way: they must acclimate to disability when it presents, and then accept it to a degree to utilise it for super-purposes. Both Stark and Logan find faith in humanity when their bodies are made transhuman: disability origins, especially ones as traumatic as seen in *Iron Man* and *Wolverine*, become catalysts for altruistic transformation. Their trauma, and the showing of this, is then justified by the positive effect it has on their character.

The origin story is the disability narrative's form of the Bildungsroman: rather than shifting into adulthood, the character undergoes a second pivotal transformation (in these cases, during adulthood) into disability. It is the extended 'What's wrong with you/I was born this way' exchange (Garland-

Thomson, 2014), realised between the character and the audience member, answering a question that is presumed by producers to have been asked. I write in the first section of this chapter that becoming super serves as an extreme form of narrative prosthesis, and this is most striking in the origin stories analysed here. Disability metaphor and origin stories are essential elements of the superhero genre. If focus becomes lost, the origin story serves as a 'baseline reference for a true interpretation' (Flanagan et al., 2017, p.14): the beginning of the disability story is a crutch for everything that follows, from personality to actions to sacrifice.

Superhero Bodies, Eugenics, and Nazism

At the beginning of *The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers is noticeably shorter and skinnier than every man around him. He desperately wants to join the army but is rejected due to a long list of health issues. His weak immune system leaves him prone to illness, alongside having asthma and heart troubles. Being chronically ill (and disabled, having been permanently weakened by illnesses like scarlet fever) does not stop Steve from making constant attempts to



Figure 6: Steve Rogers before and after the super serum (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011).

enlist, and eventually, he is given a pass by Dr Erskine, who seemingly believes in Steve's ability. The film presents a montage of shots showing Steve defying the odds and succeeding at every task that the Colonel gives the recruits, despite his visibly weaker body. While at first the story seems to present a positive one of disability, and Steve keeps up with (and in some

situations does better than) other men and proves himself as a worthy soldier, eventually it is revealed that Erskine has chosen Steve for an experimental treatment that, should it succeed, would make him the ultimate American soldier. The Colonel, who (in a comedic moment) falters when he first sees Steve, having described the line of men before him as 'the best men' (*The First Avenger*, 2011, 20:44-20:50), does not believe in Steve and his body's capabilities. It is only when, in a test deliberately conducted by Erskine, Steve throws himself on what he thinks is a live grenade to save his fellow soldiers, that the Colonel allows Erskine to administer the super serum to Steve. His disabled body is only valued once he shows he would sacrifice his life for able-bodied others. Steve does not get the basic respect awarded to everyone else at the camp until he chooses to die for them, simply because his body is considered to be 'lesser than' theirs.

We tend to associate the term eugenics with Captain America's enemy, the Nazis, but it also plays heavily into his origins. Eugenics was a widespread practice across both Europe and the US, dating back decades before the Nazis took power. People with disabilities or bodies that were considered to be 'lesser than' (including queer people, the mentally ill, and the people of colour) were sterilised, murdered, and, like Steve Rogers, experimented on. The Nazis were well-documented in their human experiments (Weindling, 2015; 2004; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), as were fellow Axis power the Japanese; however, similarly there was a slew of human experiments in twentieth-century USA. Examples include the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (CDC, 2022; McVean, 2019), in which black men were denied medication for syphilis so that scientists could observe the results. This experiment ran from 1932 to 1972, long past the defeat of the Nazis, whose practices were seen by the Western world as barbaric, despite the US similarly preying on minorities.

Minority bodies were seen as disposable when it came to potential scientific or war advancement. Notably, disabled people had long been presented as 'lesser than' human; their bodily lack extended to societal dehumanisation through eugenics. The eugenic aim was to 'advance' the world through

selective breeding: to create a 'superior' race that would correlate to Herbert Spencer's idea of 'the fittest' - what he termed 'favoured races' (1864, p.445) - and eradicate bodies that differed from the ideal. Minorities were demonised in the name of preserving the 'superior' people: able-bodied, white, straight, strong.

Eugenics is essential for understanding the cultural view of superhero bodies because it explains why, in *The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers takes the super serum with a smaller than average body and comes out looking completely different (see fig. 6). Not only is he significantly taller and more muscular, but his skin has gone from pale (a sign of sickliness) to a glowing tan, signifying that he is now the picture of health; he has, in effect, been 'cured' of his maladies. If, as Hsy writes, 'fictional narratives [...] present disability as a problem to be solved' (2015, p.28), the super serum in effect solves Steve Rogers' disability problem. It is, however, only the beginning of his extraordinary body as Captain America. If we (using the 1940s view of disability) imagine ability as a spectrum, with disability at one end and hyperability at the other, pre-serum Steve Rogers and Captain America would be opposites. Steve goes from inhabiting one extraordinary body to inhabiting a completely different one, and the societal views of each body are opposites too. Steve, having struggled with dating before, is now approached by multiple women with whom he stumbles his way through flirting, and eventually becomes the leader of the Howling Commandos, a group of soldiers who accompany him on missions. Because eugenically his new body is seen as an ideal, the attention on him quickly switches to be overwhelmingly positive.

It is important to consider here the similarities between the American and Nazi sides in *The First Avenger*, while of course acknowledging that in both real life and the film, the Nazis were anti-Semitic, ableist, homophobic, and many other discriminatory adjectives that did not apply as explicitly to the American/Allied sides. Regardless, it is no coincidence that Steve Rogers embodies the aesthetic Aryan ideal, blond hair, blue eyes, tall, tanned, strong. Written by Jewish writers in the wake of Kristallnacht, Captain

America was key in 'breaking the hold of' comic-book 'fence-sitting' (Dittmer, 2013, p.9); he was fighting the Nazis before the actual-world US. Creating a hero who was such an embodiment of the US that he bordered on parody created pressure on the US government to finally act: here was the all-American, ideal hero literally punching Hitler in the face on the comic covers, while the US continued to hold off entering the war.

Though the eugenic conception of the (Aryan) 'superior' man is closely associated with the Nazi regime, it is not exclusive to it. Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* (for which translations vary, though all agree the word indicates a 'superior man') was adopted and perverted by the Nazis to describe the Aryan/Germanic race upheld as an ideal.²² Uses have also expanded to refer to the superhero, functioning as a low-level form of propaganda to promote political ideals: José Alaniz refers to the idea that superheroes can be 'sadistic mass-culture *Übermenschen*' (2014, p.11). These cannot be extricated from the corporeal ideals that the idea of the *Übermensch* plays into. The desire to be like Captain America, strong and conventionally attractive with a body society deems valuable is not reserved for just Americans, it also works for their enemies, the Nazis. The aligning of the American and Nazi bodily ideal reflects a wider societal preference for able-bodiedness and strength, qualities which were seen as inextricable in the 1940s; if you were disabled, you likely were not strong.

While Captain America presents a hero who fights against the Nazi regime, the *X-Men* film series (2000-) goes one step further, placing one of its most important character's origins within the Auschwitz concentration camp. Erik Lehnsherr, who later becomes Magneto, is born in Germany in 1930 to a Jewish family, and during the Nazi regime is sent to Auschwitz with his family. Once he displays signs of being a mutant, he is brought to Nazi Dr Schmidt, who threatens to have his mother killed if he fails to demonstrate his powers. Because of the biological link between puberty and the emergence of powers (*X-Men*, 2000, 6:01-6:08), Lehnsherr does not have

²² Translations for *Übermenschen* vary, but include 'Beyond-Man', 'Superman', 'Overman', 'Uberman', 'Superhuman'.

enough control over his powers to be able to exhibit them at will, and, as punishment, his mother is then shot (*X-Men: First Class*, 2011, 7:19-8:35). Lehnsherr's powers, upon seeing his mother's body, then manifest in an extreme manner, shaking the room around him and crushing the helmets (and skulls) of the Nazi guards present. Schmidt's reaction is only one of glee: he exclaims 'Yes, wonderful!' as Erik experiences this seizure-like manifestation of his powers (*First Class*, 2011, 7:50-8:06, translated from German). Schmidt deliberately induces stress (to seismic levels) to force Lehnsherr to exhibit his powers: Erik endures a great deal of pain. Lehnsherr's powers, even when hardly discernible, create disability through the potential for their emergence. The spontaneous is a key element of superhero films: powers often occur as a surprise rather than through consensual, controlled creation (such as that with Captain America, who willingly takes the super-soldier serum). This is especially true for the mutants of the *X-Men* series: the mutant body is 'oxymoronic: rigidly protected but dangerously unstable', with 'infinite malleability' (Bukatman, 2003, p.51). While mutancy can be suspected by others (like Schmidt recognising it in Erik), it can remain hidden to the self until this sudden emergence. Erik does not recognise his powers when they begin to emerge and therefore cannot place himself as a mutant. By forcing them to manifest at full force by staking Erik's mother's life on his powers, Schmidt creates the 'emergence' of Erik's disability. Having suspected it because of earlier incidents in which Lehnsherr bent metal objects, Schmidt outs Lehnsherr to himself as a mutant: as different. Whether through sudden emergence or forced revealing, origin stories in the *X-Men* films are often traumatic, as *First Class* illustrates with Erik. Creating the emergence of Erik's powers, Schmidt removes Lehnsherr's agency and autonomy (a right many disabled people do not have): Erik does not get to choose his origin story.

Testing, Medicalising, and Curing Mutancy in the X-Men Series

The *X-Men* films are noted for their ability to act as analogies for actual-world marginalisation – many people perform queer, Jewish, and racial readings of

the fictional mutations and how they are treated. Much like being queer, Jewish, or a person of colour in the actual-world, mutants often face a great deal of trauma in relation to their identity: their origin stories can be extremely dark, but much like disability are seen as an obstacle to be overcome. The *X-Men* series differs from most origin stories in that its characters are not able to overcome their trauma as easily as other heroes. With his level of trauma, it is no wonder that Lehnsherr chooses to describe himself later as 'Frankenstein's monster [...] looking for my creator' (*First Class*, 2011, 25:0125:20). Having been forced to accept his mutant identity in a heavily traumatising situation, Lehnsherr, much like Frankenstein's monster, bears the repercussions of existing as a mutant in a largely non-mutant world, while his 'creator', Schmidt (who it turns out, is also a secret mutant) gets to keep his identity a secret. Comic-book films rely on a sense of astonishment from the viewer, hence powers are often revealed suddenly, in displays of significant strength. One of the first scenes in *X-Men* (2000) is that of Marie D'Ancanto (better known as Rogue) initiating the first instance of physical contact with her boyfriend, kissing him. Within moments, her boyfriend begins to convulse and is left comatose (*X-Men*, 2000, 5:10-5:56) as Rogue screams for her parents to stay away from her. Her power (the ability to sap the life force from anyone she touches) is uncontrollable. Eugenics is a key theme in the *X-Men* film series (2000-), often forming the basis of arguments against allowing the mutants to live ordinary lives or even to keep their powers. These narratives are where super-people and the disabled are most clearly connected. Despite the biological link to mutations (as explained by Jean Gray in *X-Men*, 2000, 6:01-6:08) and, similarly, biological explanations for disabilities, as Pfeiffer writes, the disabled person and the mutant carry the 'myth of sin' (1994, p.488). The idea that disabled people's existence is a fault caused by the sin of someone around them (themselves, but also their parents, their doctors, a drunk driver) is created to avoid the idea of becoming disabled themselves. If they can blame disability on sin, rather than chance, able-bodied people can absolve themselves of the 'horror' that they may become disabled. Because disability showcases

the 'fears and limitations' associated with the body, it tempts us to believe that bodies can change as easily as we change our clothes (Siebers, 2017, p.326). Disability is seen as a punishment for wrongdoing; the different body becoming a marked sign of sin. *X-Men* films often utilise the stereotype that disability/mutantism is a marker of sin, with the original sin seen to have brought about the possibility of disability into the world. Thomas Aquinas proposed that the existence of physical disability was the result of human sin, specifically the original sin (Cross, 2017, p.324). To transfer this into a world where mutantism and superpowers are often morally coded means that these traits are immediately marked as consequences of sin. Mutants like Professor X, a powerchair user who can infiltrate people's minds and speak to them much like the devil, carry deviance within their DNA: if mutantism has a biological link, the sin view shows that sin lies within this same DNA strand. If, as Aquinas posits, evil is inherent within mutants and disabled people alike, they must repent for their original sin by performing acts of good: using their mutant body to save others. Professor X, for example, recruits mutants like Rogue (and, at times, Erik) who are at the crucial moments in their mutant lives, having newly discovered their powers. By taking them to his school, educating them, and recruiting them for the X-Men, a hero team, Professor X is a quasi-religious leader, helping mutants absolve themselves of sin. Many heroes and even villains martyr themselves, such as Iron Man and Logan, committing the ultimate sacrifice and cementing the 'myth of sin' (Pfeiffer, 1994, p.488) as something to atone for.

The test of ability (Erik's deep trauma) or attempt at normality (Rogue kissing her boyfriend), that often ends up revealing a person's power follows the same eugenic perspective as the IQ test and bell curve, placing people on a spectrum of ability and normality from 'lesser' to 'hyper'.²³ Their abilities to perform acts, whether those that are natural for humans (kissing) or markedly mutant (bending metal with the mind), determine whether a person

²³ The IQ test was used as late as 1981 to diagnose 'mental retardation' in the USA, and 80% of state agencies that used this method used no secondary form of testing to verify results (Pfeiffer, 1994, p.492).

is 'normal' or 'mutant'. This method of evaluation echoes how in the actual-world disability is evaluated: through the lack of ability to perform a task able-bodied people consider natural (such as walking), or alternative means being used to achieve tasks (for example, a person with no arms using their feet in place of hands). The image of the self is paramount in constructing the mutant identity, much like the disabled one. Erik sees himself as 'Frankenstein's monster' (*First Class*, 2011, 25:01-25:07) because he, like Rogue, was forced into mutantism: the biological link only does so much to make them mutants. The moment they truly take on their mutant identities is when interacting with others brings out their abilities; when they 'understand [their] way as disabled, [they] then enter the category' (Garland-Thomson, 2014, [no pagination]).

A key theme of the *X-Men* films is the idea of the 'cure' for mutation. Central to the plot of *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), the cure is presented as 'hope', an 'answer' to the trouble of mutation (16:28-17:00). Warren Worthington II, who developed the cure, attempts to subject his son (who later becomes Angel) to the first dose. His anti-mutantism is so internalised that he is willing to risk his son's life to an experimental drug to potentially cure his mutation. As Siebers writes of negative stereotypes about disability: 'better to be dead than disabled' (2008, p.10). No matter the dangers of his cure, Worthington cannot shake his idea that mutancy is an 'affliction', 'disease', 'corruption of healthy cellular activity' (*The Last Stand*, 2006, 16:28-17:00). This stark portrayal of the medicalisation of disability under the guise of fictional mutancy, pushing to try and cure it rather than create a world that accepts mutation, shows how comic-book films are where some of the most 'widely circulated narratives about disability' (Row-Heyveld, 2015, p.521) can be seen in a popular-culture context. Disabled bodies are often highly medicalised in the search for a cure to a problem that only exists in the eyes of outsiders.

Some mutants, however, do find the cure appealing, namely Rogue, who cannot touch another person without sapping their life force away. While many heroes sport powers that they enjoy having, like Storm, who can

control the weather and most importantly control her powers, Rogue perceives hers as more of a curse than a blessing. Storm is one of the mutants who is most outspoken against the cure, and in a conversation with Rogue just after the cure is announced, she declares (*The Last Stand*, 2005, 17:30-17:53):

Rogue: Is it true? They can cure us?

Professor X: Yes, Rogue. It appears to be true.

Storm: No, Professor. They can't cure us. You want to know why? Because there's nothing to cure. Nothing's wrong with you [Rogue]. Or any of us, for that matter.

It is far easier for Storm to declare that there is nothing wrong with Rogue since she has never experienced the negative repercussions of her powers. But for Rogue, who left one boyfriend comatose and refuses to touch another for fear of doing the same to him, being a mutant denies her the chance to experience physical intimacy, comfort, or reassurance even with other mutants. If we examine mutancy as something that, much like disability, is unique in how it affects the person, Storm is comfortable in her mutation, while Rogue's is further along the spectrum: it marks her as disabled, as different. Most importantly, she does not want to be a mutant. As Dr Hank McCoy (whose mutation causes him to be covered in bright blue fur) says, 'Is it cowardice to save oneself from persecution? Not all of us can fit in so easily [as Storm]' (*The Last Stand*, 2005, 17:08-17:16). Ilea writes that, in the US, a country where 48 million people are without health insurance, disability can often be accompanied by poverty, not to mention violence and mistreatment (2009, p.179). Thus, for Rogue, the cure represents 'the opportunity to save [herself] from [...] the persecution that accompanies being different' (Ilea, 2009, p.179). While for most the cure is nothing but an insult, Rogue's storyline in *The Last Stand* serves to illustrate how mutancy and powers, much like disability, is not always a joyful or wanted experience. Rogue's exercising of her bodily autonomy by taking the cure at the end of the film, while disappointing to her peers, finally gives her the freedom she always wanted: to have nothing 'wrong' with her.

Identifying Yourself, Being Identified, and Tiring of Accounting

The identification of mutants and disabled people can be done by the self through the addition of accessories and devices, but it can also be forced by outsiders. Throughout the *X-Men* films, mutants are discriminated against both societally and in law, with the Senate at the start of the first film debating whether to force mutant registration, a practice reminiscent of the Nazis (*X-Men*, 2000, 6:08-7:58). One senator argues ‘we must know who [the mutants] are and [...] what they can do’ (*X-Men*, 2000, 7:44-7:52). Mutancy is presented as a marginalised identity, like being a person of colour, queer, female, transgender, a non-Christian religion in the US, and especially being disabled. The argument for mutants identifying themselves as such is that, by keeping track of them, the US government can keep mutants (and more importantly, ‘normal’ people) safe. The fear of the unknown, the hidden Other that (when misunderstood) poses a threat to the self, causes the need for identification, and in turn explanation for the abnormal body. The idea of keeping a register naming every mutant, as well as their abilities, gives the government renewed knowledge of the limits of the body and mind, whether mutant or human.²⁴ Their lack of understanding must be compensated for by the mutant/disabled; the ‘auditors’ discomfort’ (Couser, 2005b, p.19) is given priority over the mutant’s privacy.

Though some mutants can ‘pass’ as ‘normal’, many are identified through their functioning. While Logan/Wolverine, for example, has a superable—but passable as ‘normal’—body when his claws are retracted, his fighting ability and super-healing gives him away as a mutant. A man who bet against Logan in a fight confronts him in a bar, and whispers in Wolverine’s ear ‘I know what you are’ (*X-Men*, 2000, 13:10-13:12). Mutancy is not a ‘who’ but a ‘what’. Many sources agree that people with disabilities face dehumanisation daily (see Parker and Monteith, 2018, Chiu, 2020, Disability Justice, 2022). Having to identify and explain themselves to able-bodied people only

²⁴ There is an irony in the medicalisation and identification of mutant powers in that the most powerful of the mutants, Jean Gray and Charles Xavier, have cognitive (telepathic) and not physical powers.

emphasises the difference for mutants and disabled people: it is an acknowledgement by the 'normal' person of the other's Otherness. The gesture of making someone explain their bodily difference, fictional or not, is a performance that makes explicit the disabled person's difference.

The extensive number of origin stories and the need to account for disability/powers has become tiring for some filmmakers, with superhero films playing on the idea of varying origin stories – or not showing one at all. President of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige, said in an interview that Marvel was 'tak[ing] it for granted that people know [the origins of Spider-Man], and the specifics' (Bibbiani, 2015) when it came to making *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), the first in the third *Spider-Man* series of films in the twenty-first century. While previous *Spider-Man* films (*Spider-Man*, 2002, and *The Amazing Spider-Man*, 2012) began by showing the events that led Peter Parker to gain his spider-like powers, *Homecoming* contains no such scene. As Feige says, Spider-Man's origin story is the same across all three films: he is bitten by a radioactive spider. While other characters in comic-book films may have their origin stories changed (for a multitude of reasons), Spider-Man's remains the same. The same becomes boring. To see, for the third time in thirteen years, a teenage boy being bitten by a radioactive spider would undoubtedly be repetitive to fans of the genre but changing it would not be true to the original comics. Because audiences expect the exciting, origin stories (for both comic-book characters and disabled people), can often let us down if they are not to our satisfaction.

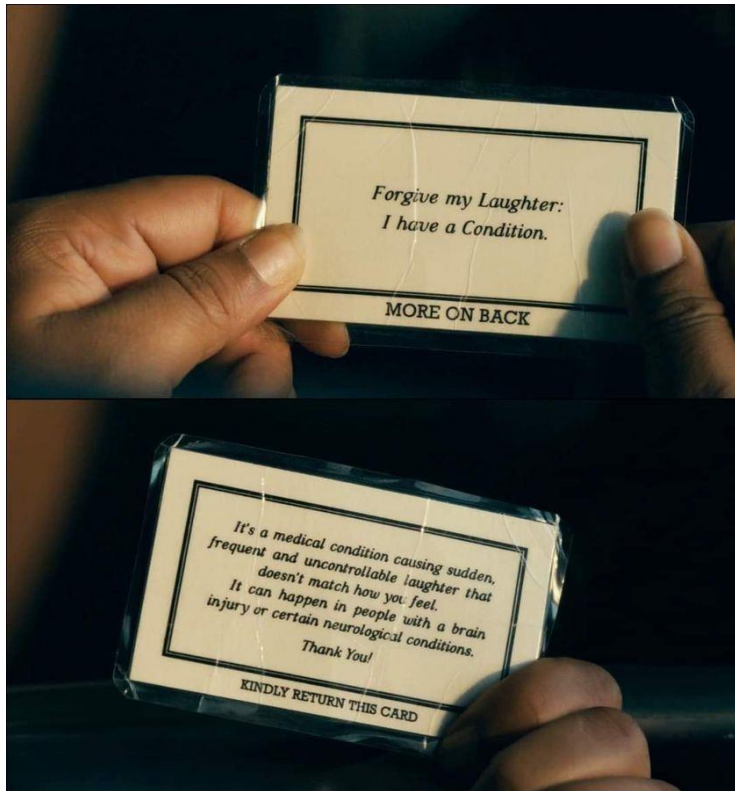
Offering an alternative origin for how someone's body became extraordinary may be a source of amusement for everyone involved, but it also allows for privacy that many people with different bodies are not often afforded. The Spider-Man we see in *Homecoming* seems particularly guarded about how he came to have powers, even saying to Tony Stark (the first person to know about Peter's secret identity) 'when whatever happened, happened' (*Civil War*, 2016, 1:20:19-1:20:25). The deliberate ambiguity of his explanation acts as a defence mechanism: revealing as little as possible at his first meeting with Stark gives him time to determine whether Stark is safe to open

up to, to reveal something that, much like stories of disability, is incredibly personal.

When Peter's secret identity is discovered by his best friend Ned in *Homecoming*, he does not get away with the same level of privacy. Just as people with disabilities are 'expected' to describe and 'explain' their bodies (Hall, 2015, p.3), Ned forces Peter to do so in a barrage of questions which answers the question of what ('so you got bit by a spider?') extremely quickly and instead focuses heavily on how Peter's body was affected (*Homecoming*, 2017, 25:45-27:20). Presented in montage format, suggesting these questions happen at random times whenever Ned feels the need to know more, the questions range from 'do you lay eggs?' to 'how far can you shoot your webs?', the latter a clear measure of super-ability. He is not immune to invasions of privacy even from his own best friend. Although the film does not explicitly show a scene where Peter gains his powers, it still goes on to provide answers to the questions the viewers undoubtedly have. It therefore cannot be said to avoid the origin trope altogether, especially when compared to explaining disability, as Peter's body is explained: he answers all of Ned's questions.

No Origins at All: The Joker as an Agent of Chaos

In *Joker* (2019), which serves as an origin story for the titular character (separate to 2008's *TDK*), Arthur Fleck has frequent outbursts of seemingly random laughter. Again, like Wolverine, he is identified as different through his behaviour under pressure, not his initial appearance or actions. The first time his outburst of laughter occurs in the film, the writers compensate for the audience's presumed questions by showing the card Arthur carries to explain his laughter (see fig. 7). The wording is especially important: by asking people to 'forgive' his laughter (*Joker*, 2019), Arthur accepts it as a disturbance, as something wrong.



Though it is not clarified whether Arthur has either a 'brain injury' or a 'certain neurological condition' (*Joker*, 2019), the card cements that Arthur has some sort of neurological difference, providing context for his behaviour throughout the film. If, as Hsy writes, disability is not

innate but rather a 'phenomenon made discernable [...] through embodied performance' (2015, pp.36-7), the card acts as Arthur's main prop. He actively engages his audience in his performance of disability through the distribution of this card, accepting and even accommodating for it to remain as close to the

Figure 7: Front and back of Arthur Fleck's card explaining his laughter (*Joker*, 2019).

boundaries of 'normal' (or, accepted by

'normals') as possible. By exercising control over how his disability is seen with the card, Arthur attempts to control how the world sees him. When this does not go as planned, for example when he has another fit of uncontrollable laughter on the train and is then taunted by a group of men (his card nowhere to be found and his voice therefore suppressed by his laughter), it has disastrous consequences, with him shooting the men dead, catalysing his descent into madness.

While the 2019 iteration of the *Joker* provided a narrative where Arthur took back control of his origins utilising his card, Heath Ledger's portrayal of the *Joker* in Christopher Nolan's 2008 adaptation *TDK* utilises anarchy to

actively reject the trope of providing an origin for his disfigurement. The darker, grittier tone of *TDK* subverted the typical tropes of the superhero genre, incorporating elements of the crime, thriller, and neo-noir genres. It received widespread acclaim, 'chang[ing] Hollywood movies forever' and 'legitimis[ing]' the superhero genre (Sims, 2018). The Joker has been hailed by many as one of the best villains of all time, even winning Heath Ledger a posthumous Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, the first acting award from the Academy for a superhero film. One of Ledger's Joker's most iconic features are his facial scars (see fig. 8). They bisect his face, creating a crude Glasgow grin, giving the effect of a permanent smile. Heath Ledger wore three silicone prosthetics to create the scars, which are, in all but one scene, emphasised by red face paint.

Part of what makes the Joker so fascinating is the mystery surrounding his back-story. On first viewing of *TDK*, viewers would be forgiven for thinking they were given an origin story for the Joker's disfigurement. While threatening Gambol, a mafia boss who had put a bounty on the Joker's head, he says (*TDK*, 2008, 30:08-31:10):

Wanna know how I got these scars? My father was a drinker and a fiend. He'd beat mommy right in front of me. One night he goes off crazier than usual, mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself. He doesn't like that. Not. One. Bit. So, me watching, he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it. Turns to me and says, 'why so serious?' Comes at me with the knife- 'why so serious?' Sticks the blade in my mouth- 'Let's put a smile on that face' and... Why so serious?



Figure 8: *The Joker's scars, seen without makeup (TDK, 2008).*

It would be easy for the viewer, especially someone familiar with the comic-book genre, to accept this story as canon. The origin story is such a key trope that it is expected, especially

when presented with a difference as clear as the Joker's scars. Twenty minutes later, however, the Joker gives an entirely different story to Rachel Dawes (*TDK, 2008, 50:46-51:52*):

You look nervous – it's the scars isn't it? Wanna know how I got them? I had a wife, beautiful like you. Who tells me I worry too much. Who says I need to smile more. Who gambles. And gets in deep with the sharks. One day they carve her face, and we've got no money for surgeries. She can't take it. I just want to see her smile again. I just want her to know I don't care about the scars. So I put a razor in my mouth and do this to myself... And you know what? She can't stand the sight of me... She leaves! See, now I see the funny side. Now I'm always smiling.

Which story is true? What can the viewer believe? These scenes, which subvert the typical origin story requirement, prove that the answer is neither. The Joker says himself that he is an 'agent of chaos' (*TDK, 2008, 1:50:371:50:39*), a classic anarchist. This anarchy disrupts the traditional origin story, creating unpredictability in his character's relationship with disability. *TDK* is therefore a paramount inclusion for a disability reading of the superhero genre. While the Joker can be said to change his origin story based on whom he speaks to, the aim is always to impart maximum terror. By relating the origin of his scars to Rachel, he implicitly involves her in his story. When it comes to telling his story, the Joker never cedes to the wants or needs of others, least of all the viewer. In the context of a disability narrative, the Joker, in refusing to answer for his scars, is disability positive.

The writers made the ‘controversial’ and ‘worr[ying]’ decision to have no origin story for the Joker, which writer David Goyer remarked surprised executives, who did not know how a movie would succeed without telling the true origin of the villain (Comic-Con International, 2020, 33:15-33:37). Goyer justified the decision by calling a version where the Joker has no origin ‘scarier’. The innate desire to make the unknown known ‘consolidates the need’ (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.6) to have the disfigured body explained. In an interview with Collider, Goyer and screenwriter Jonathan Nolan said that the Joker with no revealed origin was ‘the most interesting version’ and that not having a set story was the ‘whole point’ (Weintraub, 2008). It could be said then that what the Joker shows is that the most interesting disabled character is the one whose secrets (the story behind their disability) are never revealed. He chooses to present and explain his disability on his own terms, by not explaining it at all.

Goyer and Jonathan Nolan noted that any back-story would be ‘reductive’ in creating Ledger’s version of the Joker: for him to be ‘the most terrifying’ villain (Weintraub, 2008), his motivations must remain unknown. Implicitly, the writers are saying that (because revealing the Joker’s story is the same as revealing his motivations) disfigurement acts as motivation for a villain to commit their evil actions. There is no Joker without his scarring. Alaniz writes that the supervillain is written to follow the Gothic tradition of revealing the ‘inner deformity of the soul’ through their disfigurement (2014, p.56). The Joker’s scars are this indicator. Their jaggedness, the lack of cosmetic improvements, is in keeping with *TDK*’s darker tone: gone are the less realistic, hyper-grinning Nicholson-style Jokers. As Davis writes, the ‘normal’ person sees the disabled, as if they had come face to face with a Gorgon, and turn to stone, petrified by the physical difference before their eyes (1997, p.55). The ‘normal’ person is stuck at this moment, ‘unable to’, but ‘equally drawn to look’ (1997, p.55). If, as Garland-Thomson writes, difference commands the stare (2009), the Joker is an expert at using it for his own gain. His scars become ‘a power derived from [their] otherness’ (Davis, 1997, p.55). He is fully aware of their impact, saying to Rachel, ‘You look

nervous – it's the scars isn't it?' (*TDK*, 2008, 50:46-50:50). Though he has a blade in his hand and is a mass-murdering psychopath, he highlights *his* scars as the cause of nervousness. By embracing the curiosity surrounding his Glasgow grin, the Joker gains further power in the situations with both Gambol and Dawes by using them to incite fear. He revels in his scarring and enjoys the terror it incites.

Ledger's Joker has a more realistic look, with Nolan's *Batman* trilogy utilising realism more than most other comic-book films. Where previous Jokers had had more outlandish reasons for their clownish looks, what remains, even with Ledger's Joker's refusal to account for his scars, is a conformity to a common disability trope (Barounis, 2013, p.317). His disfigurement does not escape extreme curiosity, but what makes this Joker especially different in his approach is that he *knows* this curiosity. He knows all the 'tropes' and 'disability scripts' (Barounis, 2013, p.317). He knows what his audience wants to hear and performs the stories accordingly, not only to Dawes and Gambol, but to the viewer too. Nolan and Goyer place the Joker in the 'continual position of having to supply non-disabled people with a reason for [his] non-normative embodiment' (Barounis, 2013, p.317), but they never write a true explanation, leaving characters and viewers unknowing. In this way, the Joker becomes larger than life, metamorphosing beyond the screen to reveal the 'artifice' beyond his false stories, swiftly 'exposing nothing about his past and everything about his audience's desire for a coherent "backstory"' (Barounis, 2013, p.317). By transcending the traditional narrative for disfigured and disabled characters, the Joker gains power and fear through unknowability. By subverting the norm, he opens the door to what could be a normalisation of super-bodies and villain disfigurements: refusing to delve into the traumatic past for a coherent backstory, and instead planting himself firmly in the present.

The Ending of the Beginning: Moving on from Origin Stories

This chapter set out to parallel the disability origin story with that of the superhero/villain. It posited that the 'unknowability' of the superhero body,

much like the disabled body, 'consolidates the need' (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.6) to know why and how these often-otherworldly bodies came to be. The origin story is where the connection between the superhero genre and the disability metaphor is strongest: an origin story is often considered a requirement in narratives that feature characters with disabled bodies. Actual-world disability and superpowers may not always be one and the same, as in the case of Captain America where his actual-world disability is 'cured' by the super-soldier serum. When they do intersect, disability often provides an opportunity for personal growth in the superheroes it affects, as with Iron Man and Wolverine. Stark and Logan's disabilities are prime examples of the disability-negative narrative prosthesis trope. This trope, however, is a pillar of the superhero film: without disability, or disability metaphor, the superhero genre would be largely redundant. Disabled bodies are an essential inspiration in creating what society now knows as the supercharacter: a body that deviates from what society promotes as the norm. Acts of heroism or villainy are fuelled, emotionally and physically, by the characters' bodily differences, and, as is key to this chapter, writers present a backstory that seeks to provide an explanation for these bodies and their acts. The backstories of Iron Man, Wolverine, Captain America, and various members of the X-Men as analysed in this chapter largely fulfil these comparisons, although they frequently perpetuate negative ideas about disability. The richest example of disability and disfigurement comes with the 2008 iteration of the Joker. *TDK* displays degrees of agency unseen in previous films when it comes to the Joker's control over how his disability/disfigurement is perceived and handled. These are disability-positive portrayals: Nolan's Joker outright denies the film's characters and the viewer the backstory behind his scars in a way that transcends the screen and addresses the actual-world connotations behind his scars, namely the connection to his anarchist, evil personality. The parallels between actual-world disability experience and the embodiment of hero/villain traits (namely powers and disfigurements respectively) are maintained in the case of the Joker, however his existence as disability metaphor exceeds the more common portrayals outlined in the earlier

sections of this chapter. While disability and disfigurement often form springboards for writers to bounce origins, motivations, and actions against, as this chapter worked through its examples of origin stories across the superhero genre, it broke down how the complex embodiment that comes with utilising the disability metaphor is at its most crucial for accessing and communicating ideas of disability within the superhero origin.

2. Performance

Performing Disability

Once a story is established, the super-person is then required – by the requirements of narrative, the audience’s expectations of the genre and characters who know of their affliction – to utilise their bodily difference. In the superhero genre, it is not enough just to inhabit an extraordinary body: this body must then be put to work. In this way, super-bodies are again an apt metaphor for disability. Disabled people throughout history have been forced to use their bodies for monetary gain, from the exploitative freak show to the casting of people with disabilities to embody disability stereotypes (for example people with dwarfism who often work as humorous entertainers).²⁵ These jobs often could not be passed up: one common stereotype dictates that the difference between disabled and non-disabled lives is counted in dollars and cents (Siebers, 2008, p.10). Proving the disabled body’s worth to belong in an able-centric society creates a never-ending cycle, especially in entertainment. Because disability is ‘a phenomenon made discernable’ through ‘embodied performance’ (Hsy, 2015, p.37), the disabled person in performance becomes more disabled in the eyes of the public the more they embody the stereotypes about their disability.²⁶ As this chapter will explore, the societal pressure of necessity for a super-bodied or disfigured character to perform the superhero or supervillain is an essential part of the disability metaphor.

Disability and disfigurement are often used as catalysts to turn the regular into the super; the hero’s disablement is necessary to turn them into a superhero, the villain’s disfigurement turns them into a supervillain. In this way, disability and disfigurement are narrative prostheses vital for the

²⁵ See Pritchard (2021) for discussion of dwarfism as a point of humour in society.

²⁶ I am here referring to the widely-known freak show traditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which have left considerable impact on disabled bodies in entertainment. Embodying disability stereotypes and performing for public audiences can be an act of immeasurable agency that provides financial stability as well as the opportunity for disabled people to create their own narratives. Modern-day freak shows are often a disability-positive source of work and have sought to reclaim the negative associations with the more famous sideshows of the past.

superhero genre. Even outside of the superhero genre, villains ‘tend to be physical abnormal: scarred, deformed, or mutilated’ (Davis, 1995, p.41), their disfigurement serving as a visual marker for their villainy. Kirby writes that disfigurement in an antagonist has three main purposes: ‘as a reflection of evilness, as a cost of evilness, and as a driver of evilness’ (2020, p.923). While most villains on screen are disfigured to fulfil the first purpose (visually indicating their evilness to the viewer), superhero films tend to favour the third reason. There are countless examples of superhero films where someone undergoes a disfiguring attack and then immediately transforms into a villain. It provides a twist: a character we previously think is unassuming can suddenly transform into someone bent on revenge. Such twists promote the idea that someone can become disfigured (and in turn, evil) ‘as easily as changing clothes’ (Siebers, 2017, p.326).

Heroes, Disfigurement, Villains

It is important to acknowledge early in this chapter that heroes are faced with the necessity to use their abilities for good because of the existence of an opponent: the supervillain. This relationship is often played with, with films such as *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, *Iron Man*, and *Civil War* showcasing non-traditional antagonists: the antagonist posing as an ally, or even a superhero vs superhero storyline in *Civil War*, where viewers sided with ‘Team Cap[tain America]’ or ‘Team Iron Man’. The superhero typically faces different enemies; however for most, there is a nemesis, an enemy they may struggle to defeat or find particularly vexing. This is notable in *TDK*, where the Joker possesses a knowledge about superhero/villain dynamics and disability that stops just short of breaking the fourth wall. In one scene, he plays magician and murderer, using the façade of a magic trick (making a pencil disappear) to facilitate killing a mob member, making the pencil disappear by slamming the man’s head into it so it becomes embedded in his head (2008, 23:18-23:39). The Joker in *TDK* contains a meta-performance, Heath Ledger as the Joker and the Joker as the ‘villain’. Barounis (2013) writes about how the Joker contains undertones of camp

sexualities, especially regarding BDSM, but I would go a step further and posit that *TDK* contains homoerotic subtext between the Joker, a crip/camp sadomasochist, and Batman, a hypermasculine hero.²⁷ Batman's necessity to save sees him frequently interact with the Joker, who clearly frustrates him in order to bring out a violent side that, as he makes physical inflicting assaults on the Joker throughout the film, the Joker finds funny, giggling throughout the beatings.

In many ways, the Joker originates to play off Batman, a relationship emphasised in *TDK*, with the Joker telling Batman, 'what would I do without you? You complete me' (2008, 1:27:57-1:28:12). Where Batman is 'dark and nightmarish', the Joker is 'comedic, light'; where Bruce Wayne seeks 'order', the Joker 'embodies [...] chaos' (Dittmer, 2013, p.65). He threatens Coleman Reese's life when Reese threatens to expose Batman's secret identity because the Joker needs this cat-and-mouse game: it is an integral part of his identity. Earlier discussion establishes the Joker as an anarchist, but one constant he needs is a hero to face off against: there would be no chaos if he did not have a superhero opponent to persistently battle against. While the Joker's scars often seem to dictate his existence as an antagonist with their recognition in and out of the film, they do not drive his purpose as a *villain*. Instead, his motivator is Batman. The Joker's scars are his most noted feature, yet in the context of the film, he takes power over their effect on people and utilises them to emphasise his mysterious identity. His disfigurement is then presented positively as he uses the scars for his gain: to further his agenda of terror.

Where the Joker is an anarchist, District Attorney Harvey Dent of *TDK* stands as a figure of justice and exemplifies moral good. Dent is initially set up by the writers to be a hero. David Goyer, who provided the story for *TDK*, explained that the writers decided that Harvey Dent (not Bruce Wayne) was the protagonist of *TDK* (Duncan Jesser and Pourrey, 2012, p.58). The white

²⁷ I would argue that Batman, with other hypermasculine superheroes, has similar sadomasochistic tendencies, the reason for this being their commitment to the necessity to save, no matter the personal or physical cost.

knight to Bruce Wayne's titular dark knight, Dent is whom Wayne envisages taking over from him when he retires from being a vigilante, believing that Harvey will succeed at stopping crime in Gotham, making Batman's existence unnecessary. He performs the heroic act of self-sacrifice when at a press conference he falsely reveals that he is the Batman to stop the Joker's string of murders. While Wayne is prepared at this moment to announce himself, he is beaten to it by Dent and in allowing Dent to sacrifice himself and be arrested, Bruce Wayne allows Harvey Dent to perform the part of the hero. By taking this supporting character and making him the protagonist in *Dark Knight*, the writers use Dent as a vehicle to explore how disfigurement can turn a hero into a villain. As the Joker recognises, disfigurement sets the once-hero on a pre-determined track to becoming a villain. The marring of their body is a moment of physical transformation, crossing the boundary of



what is considered a 'normal' or 'intact' (non-disfigured) body to become othered from society.

The Joker sees in Dent an opportunity and a challenge, whilst he continues to

torment Batman. The Joker makes it his mission to turn Dent into a murderous villain to make an example

of how even the best of the Gothamites can be corrupted. Dent's status in Wayne's eyes is reproduced in the audience: he is the ideal hero, embodying the same 'extreme model of hypermasculinity' that the superhero represents (Brown, 2013, p.269). From his appearance with stereotypical masculine features such as his aquiline nose and dimpled chin to his job as the district attorney where he is shown defending vulnerable citizens by prosecuting mobsters, Harvey Dent is the epitome of the hypermasculine hero.

TDK's marketing campaign pushed the narrative of Dent as the hero before the film premiered. Part of the film's plot features Dent running to be re-

Figure 9: Harvey Dent pre-disfigurement (*TDK*, 2008).

elected as the District Attorney, and 'Dent-mobiles', campaign buses which were promoting Dent's fictional political campaign, were placed in several cities around the US leading up to the film's release (Linder, 2012). Dent's campaign slogan, which was a prominent part of his character's marketing and is repeated throughout the film, is 'I believe in Harvey Dent' (see fig.10). Utilising the political and religious

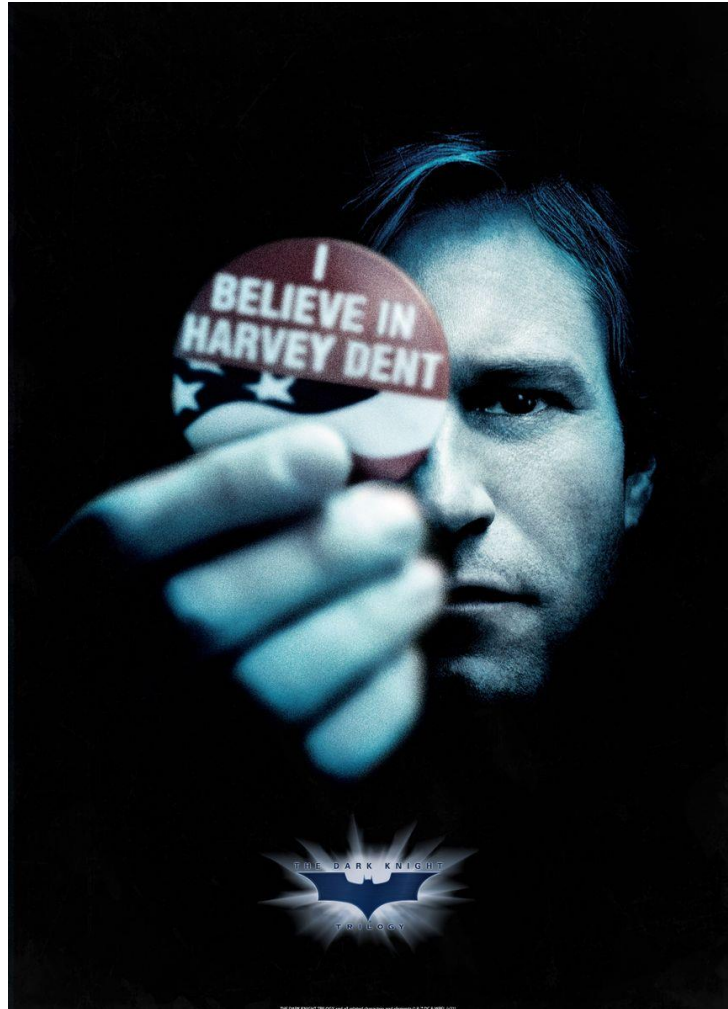


Figure 10: Promotional poster for TDK, 2008.

connotations of 'believing' in someone places Dent adjacent to a deity/leader and shows that he is a man in whom people place their faith. Dent's status as a politician is important: his face is everywhere, on posters, on television, and at conferences. If the level of importance that society places on individuality dictates how much value the face holds (Le Breton, 2015, p.5), Harvey Dent's face is one of the most valuable in Gotham. The face is a key tool in politics: from it, voters can often elicit key information as well as make assumptions about party and policies (Peterson et al., 2018). The build-up of Dent as Gotham's hero, the white knight, is brought to a crescendo when his face is physically and metaphorically disfigured.²⁸

²⁸ When Dent is killed by Batman after turning into a murderous villain, Batman and Commissioner Gordon conspire to cover up Dent's fall from grace. Batman takes responsibility for Dent's murders until the 2012 sequel *The Dark Knight Rises* when new villain Bane reveals to the public a letter Gordon wrote that told the truth about Harvey

Shortly after Dent surrenders himself to the police, he and his partner Rachel Dawes (with whom Bruce Wayne had a 'star-crossed-lovers' relationship) are kidnapped individually, and the Joker forces Batman to choose whom to save. The anarchist twist typical of Nolan's Joker's style comes when it is revealed that the addresses are switched, and Batman arrives to find Dent where he expected Dawes. Dawes and Dent are aware that only one of them will survive, and in Dent's final display of heroism, he accepts that Dawes, who takes the archetype of the damsel-in-distress, will be the one to be saved, while Dent tries and fails to save himself. The scene is written in the script (*TDK*, 2008, 1:35:32-1:35:56):

...Batman BURSTS through the door- Dent looks up in horror

DENT

NO! Not me... Why did you come for me?!

Batman STARES at Dent. The Joker lied. The counter hits 5 seconds. Batman DRAGS Dent out- Dent FIGHTS to stay

Dent's attempt to stop his being saved, to stay despite certain death, is the preceding heroic act to the explosion that ultimately disfigures him. Having fallen into a puddle of diesel while attempting to escape, as the building he was in explodes, Dent's entire left side is set alight. The use of fire instead of the comics' method of acid to create Dent's



Figure 11: Harvey Dent post-disfigurement (*TDK*, 2008).

disfigurement draws parallels with medieval ordeals by fire. Often considered to be a judgement by God, ordeals by fire involved the accused carrying or walking over an extremely

hot object. Their hands or feet were then bound for three days, and upon examination, if they were unscarred they were deemed innocent, having

Dent's end.

been protected from injury by God (Kerr et al., 1992). Dent does not escape unscathed: the left side of his face and neck has severe third-degree burns. God does not intervene, and despite being given deity-like status in his political campaign, Dent cannot heal himself psychologically nor does he want to physically. The Joker's mission in disfiguring Dent is, as Gordon says, to take 'the best of [Gotham] and [tear] him down' (*TDK*, 2008, 2:21:01-2:21:22). His trial by fire is a test of morality: in losing the woman he loves, and enduring severe pain, Dent's dedication to his status as Gotham's white knight is challenged. He chooses not to undergo skin grafts, nor does he accept pain medication (*TDK*, 2008, 1:40:29-1:40:40). This means that visually his disfigurement remains extreme (see fig. 11). He does not heal, and therefore in the context of an ordeal by fire, his face reflects his extreme guilt at failing to either save Dawes or die with her.

In a moment of foreshadowing, Dent says, 'you either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain' (*TDK*, 2008, 20:53-20:58). The lack of agency in the phrase 'see yourself become', especially in the context of Dent's transformation post-disfigurement (he kidnaps Gordon's son and shoots several people he feels have wronged him and Dawes), suggests that in Nolan's interpretation of Dent's origin story, an external force is to blame for Dent's turn to villainy. This external force is the disfigurement and trauma inflicted upon him, which serves to 'drive' and 'legitimise' his evilness (Kirby, 2020, p.923). When he rejects cosmetic treatment for his burns, he embraces both his disfigurement and his new identity: if the disfigured face serves as 'evidence of a ruined subjectivity' (Barounis, 2013, p.317), then Dent utilises the horror of his appearance to facilitate the Two-Face identity. Such a marked physical transformation destroys any association people may have had with the Harvey Dent they believed in. His disfigurement has destroyed his 'matrix of identity', making him 'unnameable and monstrous' (Le Breton, 2015, p.10). When they see the burns that cover half his face, characters place ideological meaning in Dent's disfigurement, assuming that the 'horrors' are meant to account for the 'perverse behaviors of the present' (Barounis, 2013, p.317). Dent, unable to achieve a hero's death when he

tries to die alongside Rachel, becomes the villain. Having been liberated from the constraints of his Harvey Dent identity, Dent has embraced the ‘temptations that he is accustomed to holding back’ (Le Breton, 2015, p.6) and completed his permanent transformation into Two-Face.

Invisible Disfigurement, Femininity, and Motherhood

Scarlett Johansson’s status as a ‘posthuman pinup girl’ (Matthews, 2018, p.5) finds its roots in many of her roles, but Black Widow is one of the most prominent. A Russian assassin who trained in the mysterious ‘Red Room’, Natasha Romanoff was recruited to SHIELD after working for the KGB. She goes from villain to hero before the Avengers franchise begins, defecting from the USSR to the USA. Black Widow is the only woman on the core Avengers team, and her femininity is often used to her advantage, for example in *The Avengers* (2012) when she pretends to be a damsel-in-distress to gain information from Russian criminals. Whilst Romanoff uses it to her advantage, womanhood can be considered in some ways to be socially disabling, with society ‘pressuring them to move their bodies in certain, similar ways’ (Siebers, 2008).²⁹ Femininity is often used in figurative language to represent people as inherently weak (phrases such as throwing ‘like a girl’ and vaginal slang like ‘pussy’ are often used as synonyms for weak). Romanoff allows herself to be objectified and her power minimised so as to catch her enemies off guard when their assumptions about her strength are disproven.

It is revealed in 2015’s *Avengers: Age of Ultron* that upon graduation from the Red Room, Widows (as all the assassins are known) are forcibly sterilised by having their uteri and ovaries removed (2015, 1:07:20-1:08:28):

BRUCE BANNER

²⁹ Clearly the experiences of women as a whole do not equate to that of the entire disabled population, and intersectionality makes clear this important distinction. Discussion of whether ‘disabling’ is an apt or politically correct word to describe the experience of (especially) non-disabled women would be suited to more experienced researchers.

There's no future with me. I can't ever... I can't have this, kids.
Do the math, I physically can't.

NATASHA ROMANOFF

Neither can I. In the Red Room, where I was trained, where I was raised, um, they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. It makes everything easier. Even killing. [*she hesitates a moment*] You still think you're the only monster on the team?

Having not disclosed this previously, the reveal of Romanoff's disfigurement comes as a surprise to the viewer. Although invisible and irreversible, since disfigurement is used to create a villainous character Romanoff's painful secret of her sterility acts as a burden upon her: she sees herself as a 'monster' because of it, despite being forced to undergo the surgery. While Romanoff is afforded the social mobility that able-bodied people benefit from because her sterilisation is hidden and therefore unknown until she makes it known, her knowledge of her disfigurement is a permanent reminder of her KGB roots. She cannot escape her past: it is hidden physically inside her body in the metaphorical space where her uterus 'should' be, a space which only grows more palpable in this scene.³⁰ While Banner thinks his sterility means a lack of future, Romanoff rejects this assertion, even if her continued attempt to persuade Banner to run away with her after this mutual revelation shows character growth. However, if Romanoff still felt as if she could not have a future, she would not try to build one with Banner. The sterilisation is expanded upon by her sister and fellow Widow Yelena Bartova, in a conversation with Alexei Shostakov (a Russian super-soldier and Yelena and Natasha's father-figure) in 2021's *Black Widow* (1:02:20-1:02:52):

ALEXEI

Why the aggression, huh? Is it your time of the month?

YELENA

I don't get my period dipshit. I don't have a uterus.

³⁰ Romanoff in this scene plays into hegemonic ideas surrounding women and maternity; without a uterus in which she could grow a child, she feels worthy of the other 'monster' on the team: Banner.

NATASHA

Or ovaries.

YELENA

That's what happens when the Red Room gives you an involuntary hysterectomy. They kinda just go in and rip out all your reproductive organs. They just get right in there and chop them all away. So you can't have babies.

ALEXEI

OK, OK, you don't have to get so clinical and nasty!

Alexei's response shows, despite him being comfortable with casual violence and murder throughout the film, that the sterilisation of the Widows is a taboo topic. The strategic move by the Red Room to remove their ovaries as well as uteri means that none of the Widows can have biological children, having had their eggs removed to rule out surrogacy. By removing their capacity to have 'the one thing that might matter more than a mission', the Red Room strives to turn the Widows into killing machines. Menstruation and pregnancy are deemed unnecessary biological functions that must be removed upon 'graduation' to become a real Black Widow, a worthy assassin. There is no possible 'cure' and no way of overcoming this to succeed in having biological children, nor to alleviate the feeling that their disfigurement represents a 'moral bankruptcy' (Kirby, 2020, p.921). By presenting Black Widow's disfigurement in the form of being sterile, Marvel utilises heterosexual norms of maternity to heighten the impact the reveal has on the viewer. A character played by a noted sex symbol, who often embodies stereotypical male-gaze ideas of femininity even in combat, has her sex organs removed. She is able to access her sexuality in order to gain the upper hand (flirting with enemies), but when it comes to reproduction she is denied bodily autonomy for fear of supplanting her loyalty to the KGB.

In 1997, Garland-Thomson wrote that disabled characters' status of 'lack' is often compensated for through 'benevolent maternalism' by the female protagonists (p.17). Though Garland-Thomson's text was written twenty-five years ago, Black Widow's narrative persists in promoting this idea through

her relationship with Bruce Banner/Hulk. In 2015's *Age of Ultron*, the opening battle establishes a new relationship between Romanoff and Banner, when Romanoff performs a routine to calm the Hulk and return him to his Banner form. This routine is referred to as a 'lullaby' by Steve Rogers. Despite their romantic relationship throughout the film, Romanoff here is placed in the maternal position. As the only woman on the Avengers team up until the end of this film, she fulfils both roles: girlfriend and caregiver, playing into classic Freudian psychology in her relationship with Banner. The scene of Romanoff tracing the Hulk's hand and wrist to spark the transformation back into Banner is sandwiched between clips of Tony Stark and Rogers infiltrating the enemy's base and investigating (*Age of Ultron*, 2015, 7:20-12:16). The men on the Avengers team never perform this care-taking need of calming down Banner: instead they continue to use their bodies to fight. This scene is a sharp example of how the Avengers franchise enforces the gender roles Garland-Thomson described eighteen years prior to *Age of Ultron's* release. Romanoff is required to utilise her body for emotional work that benefits Banner and the largely-male Avengers team. These displays of benevolent maternalism act as compensation for her lack of sexual organs and, by association, direct maternity. As a woman, she must do double the work to be a superhero: to prove her worth both as a woman and as a disabled person. The reveal later in the film that Romanoff is not 'whole', that she like Banner has a 'monst[rous]' body, is used to facilitate a narrative suspicion of her as an anti-hero with questionable loyalties, despite being a faithful member of SHIELD for the entirety of her nine films. Her maternal actions towards Banner serve to underlie her conversion narrative from villain (pre-Avengers franchise) to hero, which likens her management of her disfigurement to a religious experience (Wohlmann and Rana, 2019). Through Romanoff's work with Banner, she attempts to leave her 'old, wretched li[fe]' behind to be 'reborn' into a better person: a hero (Wohlmann and Rana, 2019).

Her status as a hero is only validated when, in 2019's *Endgame*, she sacrifices her life to save that of her best friend Clint Barton (who is married

and has several children). Barton's life is given more value because he is a father and husband, while Romanoff has neither partner nor children. Having these storylines played out by a hyper-attractive woman, Johansson, panders to the male gaze, including her maternal role as an emotional carer for Banner. Romanoff is sometimes (most often in *Age of Ultron*) portrayed as subservient to the men on her team whereas in other films she does not seek their approval or validation. Whilst *Black Widow* is meant to be a figure of girl-power, her character continues to perpetuate Hollywood traditions of women in action films fulfilling patriarchal norms, acting out heterosexual relationships and caring for men. In the moment when she dies, Natasha Romanoff takes back her bodily autonomy and resolves her disfigurement, but she ends her life (a life she and the films deem lesser than because of her inability to have a 'future' – children) to do so.

Bucky Barnes, Prosthetic Arms, and Cybernetic Evils

Natasha Romanoff's Russian background is the former half of her life: the



promotional poster (Marvel, 2014)

line between when she holds allegiance to Russia and when she defects to work for SHIELD may be blurred, but the separation of allegiances, being in the former and latter parts of her life, allow for a distinct distance from her past. Another key character in the *Avengers* franchise, Bucky Barnes, does not have this separation. Barnes fights alongside Steve Rogers in WWII, until he seemingly falls to his death midway through *The First Avenger*. It is not revealed until the 2014 sequel, *The Winter*

Soldier, that Barnes survived this fall and was kidnapped by Soviet Hydra operatives. While in Soviet capture, Barnes was brainwashed and his memory wiped to create the WS who serves as the primary antagonist for this film. WS is a deadly assassin with the addition of a cybernetic left arm (see fig. 12). This bionic arm's performance goes above that of a flesh arm, and its power supersedes the strength that the super-soldier serum provides, with WS catching Captain America's shield in one of his first scenes (*The Winter Soldier*, 2014, 37:27-37:35), setting himself as Rogers' physical superior.³¹

While Barnes' arm is frequently repaired to improve functionality or patch issues (*The Winter Soldier*, 2014, 1:27:181:27:51), he himself is repeatedly tortured with intense electric shocks to induce memory loss. These shocks reduce him to a 'tabula rasa', a blank slate.³² Hydra finds human traits to be incongruent with the weapon they want WS to be. Wiping Barnes' memory not only removes his sense of self, it removes his US allegiance, his morals, and his values. He is manipulated into becoming a weapon. This is expanded in the 2016 follow-up to *The Winter Soldier*, *Civil War*, in which it is established that there are a set of code words which, when spoken in Russian, can revert Barnes to his WS persona, making him a weapon of whoever commands him. This deep mental conditioning makes him verbally programmable, able to be rebooted much like a machine when he does not comply. WS's cybernetic arm is an extremely intelligent machine that works fluently in tandem with Barnes' movements, but this machine can be controlled by external forces through use of these activation words and extends to further Barnes' development into the WS machine-esque assassin.

³¹ For further reading on the Winter Soldier's bionic arm in an actual-world context, see Keogh (2021).

³² The translation of tabula rasa as 'blank slate' has been contested by Duschinsky, who posits that a more apt translation within the original context of the phrase would be 'a slate that has been blanked' (2012, p. 510). Duschinsky's interpretation to place the slate as a passive object is an apt comparison in the case of Bucky Barnes, who is repeatedly subjected to electroconvulsive treatment to retain this transhumanist tabula rasa weapon.

The fact that his arm is treated with such care while he is tortured shows how Barnes is seen post-amputation as a machine; his bionic arm dictates his existence. The scientist who gives Barnes the arm says that Barnes will be 'the new fist of Hydra' (*The Winter Soldier*, 2014, 1:27:34-1:27:47), a metaphorical phrase turned literal when WS is repeatedly dehumanised in his appearance. In the first fight scene between WS and Steve Rogers, WS punches through the window of Rogers and Black Widow's car bionic arm first (2014, 1:16:39-1:16:47). For comparison, WS's face is not shown for another 7 minutes, kept hidden by his mask and glasses partly for dramatic effect when Rogers realises who he is, partly to remove the human connection and connotations that the face naturally facilitates. Covering his face entirely in black and blocking the ability to connect through facial expressions and eye contact continues Barnes' status as the tabula rasa. He is emotionally cut off from the world he once knew, the mask serving as a physical barrier between him and Rogers, their relationship reduced to a blank slate when WS continues to try and kill Rogers despite Rogers' recognition that WS is Barnes.

When Barnes' arm is amputated, it signifies the beginning of his switch from hero to villain. Amputation on screen is 'invariably coded as "loss"', a 'tragic life event' (Scheurer and Grayson, 2021, p.3) that becomes Barnes' defining disability and disfigurement. The star on the bicep of his bionic arm serves as a permanent insignia, a brand marking him as Hydra's property. His allegiance is etched onto his body, with the five-pointed red star being a recognised communist symbol; a symbol that, in Barnes' US home would mean immediate distrust. The benefits of having an advanced bionic arm outweigh those of removing it. In the film's final battle scene, in which Captain America and Barnes face Iron Man, who had just discovered that the WS was responsible for the deaths of his parents 20 years prior, Iron Man rips Barnes' bionic arm from his body, leaving him an amputee again. In a final nod to the interconnection between Barnes/WS and his bionic arm, his stump is not flesh but machinery, with wires mimicking blood vessels (see fig. 13). In an end-credits scene in *Civil War*, Barnes is shown voluntarily re-entering cryostasis in Wakanda to remove the WS



Figure 13: Barnes' bionic stump (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016)

programming from his mind. After his recovery, he appears in 2018's *Infinity War*, where

T'Challa, king of Wakanda and the Black Panther, delivers him a new cybernetic arm. The tone is solemn: Barnes' response upon seeing the new arm is to simply ask, 'where's the fight?' (*Infinity War*, 2018, 59:21-59:35). His reaction shows his awareness of the conditions under which he receives a prosthetic: Barnes' body is only 'completed' for him to be used as a weapon (Hydra) or as a soldier (Avengers). The benevolence of Wakanda is 'interwoven with [the] underlying "conversion narrative"' of Barnes leaving his 'old, wretched' life behind as WS, and being 'reborn' as a hero (Wohlmann and Rana, 2019). He, like Black Widow, is given redemption through the generosity of the Avengers, but only in exchange for his labour fighting alongside them. In the interim period between losing his Soviet arm and gaining the Wakandan model, he is always shown with a stump, never an alternative prosthetic, cybernetic or otherwise. Bucky Barnes is one example of a continuing history of disabled people who use, or are made to use, their bodies for work, whether this be exhibitionism in the freak show tradition or fighting within the fictional superhero genre. A cybernetic arm in Barnes' case fulfils the 'essential prerequisite for inclusion in the workforce' (here the Avengers superhero team): he accesses the 'able body' (Barnes, 2000, p.446) and is deemed an able fighter. For Bucky Barnes' individual storyline, receiving the Wakandan arm marks the crux at which he transfers back from villain to hero, but this change only comes on the condition that he uses his arm for good. His disability is controlled, much like a machine turned on and off, by his allies (T'Challa and the other Avengers), given to him not to assist Barnes but to assist the team and indeed the world. The societal requirement of super-abled people to use their abilities for good and

become a superhero means that fighting villains and saving humans becomes a form of work, of duty.

Superhero Duty, Labour, and Choosing Identities

The lives of super-people are a constant performance: not just of their super personae, but also of the normate. Super-people's true selves are their super personae; their alter ego, the image they curate so carefully to the public, is often that of the normate, the 'normal' man. Despite being human-born and raised, the characters analysed in this thesis often must work to pass as human rather than revealing their hidden abilities. They spend a considerable amount of time maintaining their two lives and most importantly maintaining their separation, often in ways that create tension between the ordinary and extraordinary lives. For example, Peter Parker (the Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield iterations) sells photos of himself as Spider-Man to newspapers, exploiting himself for financial gain as well as the security that comes with establishing himself not as the Spider-Man, but the man who photographs him. A more explicitly disability-focussed example, which I discussed in the Introduction, is Daredevil, who is blind but has enhanced senses that give him the ability to 'see' through advanced echolocation, and who as Matt Murdock deliberately acts 'more blind', i.e. using a cane when he regularly sprints through New York as Daredevil with ease in order to appear unassuming. As Daredevil, he must deny the identity of Murdock; as Murdock he denies the identity of Daredevil. The Jekyll-and-Hyde-esque conflict that is inherent to the superhero identity means that superheroes exist as outsiders to society. Karaminas describes this, suggesting that super bodies exist in the 'in-between space of self and identity', 'vacillating between the human persona and the Other side' (2006, p.506). A common theme of superhero films is the hero being torn between their 'duty' to save the world and their 'normal' life, often symbolised by a romantic partner. Tony Stark is one example of this, as my previous discussion of his storyline explored: he vacillates between being Iron Man and being a husband to Pepper Potts until he dies in *Endgame*, forever trapped in his Iron Man identity.

Comparatively, when Captain America time-travels to the past at the end of *Endgame*, he chooses life where Stark died for duty. *Endgame* places heavy focus on the life Rogers left behind when he was frozen in ice for 70 years, revealing that he never moved on from his lost love, Peggy Carter. When Rogers fails to return after the expected five seconds, the characters and audience are surprised as Rogers is revealed, now an old man, having never returned from the past: instead, he has lived the 80+ years leading up to the canonical present. Stark's death has clearly influenced Steve's choice, with him remarking to Sam Wilson, 'I thought, maybe I'll try some of that life Tony was telling me to get' (*Endgame*, 2019, 2:46:04-2:46:13). The camera pointedly rests on Rogers' hand, now sporting a wedding ring, and though he declines to tell Wilson about his wife, the viewer is given a voyeuristic insight: the film's final scene is a flashback where the camera, travelling through the window of a mid-century house, reveals Rogers and Carter, dancing together. Steve Rogers' storyline concludes in the opposite way to Tony Stark's, in the same film. Him visibly ageing, often a process understood as an 'inexorable decline, involving shrinking, atrophy, and a loss of mental capacity' (Barry, 2015, p.132) is instead a source of joy: a sign of a life well lived. If we view the human persona/Other superhero double life as a binary, Stark becomes caught in the middle, unable to give up being Iron Man but loving Pepper Potts. Steve chooses one side of the binary: the one where he can be normal, no longer 'outside of, marginalized within' (Shyminsky, 2011, p.294), or exploited by society.

Exploitation, Performance, and the Freak Show

Superhero films have grown in recent years to be a colossal form of capital within the film industry, representing 25% of the domestic (US) marketplace in 2019 (Mendelson, 2019), a year that saw the hugely anticipated release of *Avengers: Endgame*, a film that became the highest-grossing film of all time. It is not an exaggeration to state that superhero films are a vast form of capital for those who produce and star in them. Super-people are often

depicted within the canon of the films as having considerable wealth, so as to fund their lifestyles (Tony Stark, Charles Xavier, Bruce Wayne), however they themselves are often a form of capital as soldiers, exploited by agencies or governments to perform as weapons. The societal pressure/expectation to perform in a certain way alongside the disability metaphor means heroes/villains do not escape the freak show standard that actual-world disabled people were forcibly subjected to. They were made to perform for the gain of able-bodied people no matter the personal consequences. This is seen in *Avengers* (2012), the first of the Avengers films in the MCU, where Nick Fury introduces the Avengers initiative, saying, 'The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people to see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, *to fight the battles that we never could*' (1:30:13-1:30:44, emphasis mine). The Avengers, and superheroes in general, are expected to perform (to act on the necessity to save) when humans are unable to help. This is to say that superheroes are a distinct group of people, identified by a bodily difference, who provide a unique service to benefit those outside of this group. Although in canon the service they provide is necessary, saving the world, and not for entertainment like in the freak show, superhero films in the actual-world function as a form of entertainment where we the viewers pay to see those with extraordinary bodies displaying their abilities in front of us.

Extraordinary bodies have long been an integral part of culture and entertainment, including the oral tradition of folklore and mythology, predating the film industry by millennia. Mythical creatures are 'explanations for the startling bodies whose curious lineaments gesture towards other modes of being' (Garland Thomson, 1996 p.1). Monstrous creatures like gorgons were 'prodigious wonders' in ancient worlds, while freaks were 'profitable performers' (Garland Thomson, 2009, p.164) under capitalist societies. With the superhero genre taking stead as one of the most popular cultural examples of fantastical fiction, the cultural practice of fictionalising and exaggerating actual-world extraordinary bodies continues from the myth

to the freak show to the superhero film. The connection to the freak show is referenced throughout the films discussed in this thesis: 'freak', a term which has broadened in the years since the freak show's prominence, is frequently used by non-powered people as an insult towards superheroes and villains alike. 'Freak' indicates a lack of humanity, an Othering by the user towards the subject, however contemporarily the term has also connoted a sense of community with those who do not fit into what is deemed the 'norm'. The OED cites New York Magazine's usage of 'freakazoid', a derivative of freak, appearing in an (apt for this thesis) review of *X-Men*: 'The appeal of the comic book, and, in a darker and more voluptuous way, of [*X-Men*], is that it celebrates being a freakazoid' (Rainer, 2000). Freak shows did not just include those with physical disabilities, they also showcased those who *chose* extraordinary bodies: with body modifications such as tattoos and piercings. 'Freak' is not an innate quality, it is a way of thinking about and presenting people (Bogdan, 1996, p.24). For some freak show performers and some super-people, it is a positive and empowering way of presenting the self. Drawing parallels between superhero groups such as the Avengers and the freak show troupe, Iron Man is an example of someone who has the choice to make himself extraordinary, worthy of being among the other members of the Avengers (a super-soldier, a Norse god, a scientist who turns into a giant green man, to name but three). He sees the freak show that comes with being a visibly powered being in the MCU canon, let alone being part of a super-group, and finds benefits in that life, much as those who made deliberate body modifications for freak shows did.

This is not to say, however, that Tony Stark alone (or even those with bodily differences such as Steve Rogers) hold such significant connection to the performative practices of the freak show. Superhero films are never titled for the hero's civilian identity. The point at which superheroes become true freaks is when they embrace their super identities. The culmination of their origin stories, as explored in the previous chapter, achieve the creation of the performance identity: the superhero. Origin stories too have links to freak show performers. Charles Stratton, known better by his stage name 'General Tom Thumb', given due to his short stature from a form of

dwarfism, blamed his height on his mother's grief over the death of the family dog while pregnant (Bogdan, 1988, no pagination). Promoters explained that Lionel, 'The Lion-Faced Man' who was covered in hair due to hypertrichosis, was born that way because his mother witnessed his father being mauled to death by a lion while she was pregnant. The emphasis on freak show origin stories on the mother (maternal impression) indicated the possibility of being 'marked' by a mother's trauma, emotions (linked to hysteria), or mistakes, through sin. The efforts to explain disability or bodily difference through extreme and often fantastical tales are reflected in the superhero genre, another popular form of entertainment based around the extraordinary.

The necessity to include not only an extraordinary origin story but also the physical aspects that make up a 'stage presence', including 'costuming, staging, props, and hyperbolic narrative' (Garland Thomson, 2009, p.164), means that superheroes like the Avengers take on an exaggerated role, a highly-saturated archetype of the hero. In *Avengers*, costume and appearance is vital to the full realisation of each superhero. This is famously symbolised by the phrase 'suit up'. First said by Steve Rogers and echoed throughout the MCU, 'suit up' means not only to literally put on the supersuit, but also to enter the super persona. Just as 'irregular pigmentation enhanced by a loincloth and some palm fronds produced the Leopard Boy' (Garland-Thomson, 1996, p.5), the extraordinary bodies of superheroes lead to the production of their personae enhanced in-canon by costume and titles that hyperbolised their social status (Captain America) and unique positions (Iron Man, singular to emphasise his individual and unachievable status). Freak show promoters used imagery and symbols to create a 'public identity' that would have the 'widest appeal' (Bogdan, 1996, p.25), with patriotic identities like Captain America as well as respected ranks such as Captain, and Dr Strange creating connotations of knowledge and experience, even when in Captain America's case he did not hold the military rank of captain. Outside of canon, in the actual-world, the promotion of superhero films functions to further the freak show relationship: titles such

as *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Amazing Spider-Man* utilise adjectives to emphasise their difference, though the freak show often focused on how 'inferior' the people exhibited were (Bogdan, 1996, p.29) where superhero films signify the move from seeing extraordinary bodies as inferior, to control and gawk at, to being marvels responsible for saving human lives.

The Jokers: Humour, Performance, and Audience

A more conventional example of performance is seen throughout 2019's *Joker*, when Arthur Fleck dances, first in a bathroom after his first murders and then just before he enters the stage on the Murray Franklin talk show. Fleck's movements prior to this are erratic, spontaneous, often clumsy. They are indicative of his unstable mental state, however his movements during the dance sequences are fluid, controlled, graceful. He transforms. The Joker in his various iterations has been an essential part of this thesis; he defies the requirement for an origin story, displaying an almost meta knowledge of how he performs as a villain in *TDK* (portrayed by Heath Ledger), and in *Joker* (portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix), as Arthur Fleck succumbs to madness, accepting his Joker persona, he begins to perform more and more, the dance sequences acting as interludes until in the final act, beginning as he dances before entering the stage and killing Franklin, Arthur Fleck becomes the Joker. His entire life becomes his performance. The clown persona that the Joker adopts serves as an ironic twist: the name Joker indicates humour and the purpose of clowns is to make people laugh, to bring joy. The Joker does the opposite of these things and amuses only himself with it. His connection to the circus, reinforced by the clown makeup and bright costume that both iterations wear, means that Barounis posits that Ledger's Joker serves as an example of the first phase of 'disability humor' (2013, p.312), which was categorised by 'freak shows' and 'fools' (Haller, 2010, p.170). I believe that it is Phoenix's Joker who is a fool, repeatedly being tricked, beaten, and teased by his peers. Instead, Ledger's Joker embodies Haller's third phase of disability humour, when he 'tak[es] control of the humor message' (2010, p.170). Clown makeup, alongside

Ledger's Joker's scars, elongates his smile and serve throughout the film as an 'outward manifestation of his inner perversity and fundamental lack of humanity' (Barounis, 2013, p.312). His usage of the clown identity, painting an 'S' on a truck to make its slogan '(S)LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE', subverts the humour tradition, incorporating the taboo and morbid to establish jokes that are not funny to the citizens of Gotham, and not appropriate for children (who would typically be a clown's audience). Both Jokers laugh at inappropriate moments, during torture and murder. Their performances as clowns entertain themselves only.

The interactions of super-people with their human peers, like freak show exhibits with normate-based audiences, often promote the assumption that disability cancels out a person's complexity and reduces them to 'a single attribute': their extraordinary body (Garland Thomson, 1997, p.12). Their



Figure 14: Captain America using his strength to ground a helicopter (Captain America: Civil War, 2016)

bodily differences often dictate their lives, they form their careers around utilising their body for performance-based labour.

Even more conventional displays of bodily feats, such as Captain America using his strength to pull a flying helicopter back to earth (see fig. 14), are placed within the film to showcase his extraordinary body much like the strongmen of freak shows. The Jokers may ascend out of their singular attributes, their disabilities, and take control of their narratives, however the freak show convention remains a stalwart influence upon the superhero genre.

Closing the Show: Choosing to 'Quit' Being Super

This chapter has explored how extraordinary bodies in the superhero film context, especially in the case of the disfigured villain, are portrayed as no longer belonging to the individual: instead, their disabilities and disfigurements often define the character's narrative and create the expectation for them to perform, from their origins onward. Bucky Barnes' cybernetic arm and the red star emblem means he literally wears his allegiance on his sleeve, and it is only when he receives a new arm that he fully ascends to the hero identity. Black Widow's sterilisation is meant to make her a ruthless assassin, and she sees herself as a monster because of it. When Harvey Dent suffers burns to half of his face and loses his fiancée, it sparks his evil turn into the murdering Two Face. Engaging in (and in many cases perpetuating) the stereotype and Gothic tradition that disfigurement signifies inner evil and 'ruined subjectivity' (Barounis, 2013, p.317), superhero films as a low-status film genre often lack the complexities of the reality of disfigurement that we see in the actual-world. This is no surprise: superhero films are an 'outlandish fantasy' (Locke, 2005, p.29) that cannot and do not claim to represent the actual-world, even when disfigurements align with disfigurements recognised in the actual-world (sterilisation, though hidden, the Glasgow grin, burns). Their purpose is not to educate about the disability metaphor they adopt, it is to entertain, to follow a formula set by comic-books where the visual understanding of characters was paramount to the media: scars were, and years later still are, an easy method to indicate that someone is a villain, they are an 'incitement to narrative' (Barounis, 2013, p.317). The evolution of this to more complex storylines like that of Bucky Barnes in the MCU, who is given hero status both before and (critically) after his disfigurement, gives space for the questioning of the 'disfigurement as evil' narrative.

The impact of disfigurement and powers upon a super-human's life goes beyond the physical into the emotional, romantic, and familial. Many heroes, and most villains, do not have a family or a partner because this would interfere with their duty and make them vulnerable, as all non-super people

within the superhero universes are. Steve Rogers can access the benefits of the normal life because he can successfully pass as the normate where many characters struggle. Alaniz refers to the 'grotesque inhuman stasis' (2014, p.12) that many heroes end up in, and quotes Abrahams' writing on the folklore hero: 'th[e hero] not only never marr[ies], they never find the real heroic culmination in death. They are permanently stuck in the hero role' (1966, p.359). I posit that while many continue to fulfil this trope, including the three recent live-action iterations of Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield, and Tom Holland, who all appeared as variants of Spider-Man in 2021's *Spider-Man: No Way Home*), a character that has been rebooted twice in the 21st century, the cases of Tony Stark and Steve Rogers escape this. Tony Stark dies, while Steve Rogers marries. Neither have been brought back to the MCU to revive them, though their mantles are to be passed on.

Superhero duty and ideas surrounding disabled performance often intertwine in ways that exploit the bodily differences of super-people. For us, the actual-world viewers of these films, cameras and costumes are utilised to emphasise these extraordinary bodies and create a spectacle for our entertainment. The expectations and traditions of the superhero genre dictate the narratives of the characters: Steve Rogers only gets to give up his life as Captain America and marry the woman he loves when he has fulfilled his duty to Earth and to the viewer. Much like actual-world retirement from work, (or in the case of superheroes who retire due to injury or death, the army), superheroes are required to give a suitable period of service which varies character to character. The fact that their retirement tends to come after a significant personal loss, or the realisation of a life not well lived suggests that the superhero body and life are a burden upon the people who live them. While many heroes enjoy saving lives, and villains enjoy unleashing anarchy, they eventually either die or tire of their role and attempt to seek an experience outside of the one society dictates they use their extraordinary body for.

Conclusion

Through the exploration of the disability metaphors that underlie the superhero film genre, this thesis has presented an original contribution within the fields of superhero studies and critical disability studies. I have focussed on the parallels between the theorised lived experiences of disabled people in the actual-world and the fictionalised experiences of heroes and villains within the superhero worlds, through several case studies from both Marvel and DC Studios. This thesis has developed the idea that, as Chapter 1: Origins explored, the origin story often required of superheroes and villains alike mimics the way that disability is said to 'demand' a story merely by existing (Bérubé, 2005, p.570), both being an expectation of the viewer or starrer. This theory transcends the boundaries of hero and villain archetypes. The background developed of human experimentation, a common origin story in the superhero genre, and the medicalisation and thus testing of disability and super-ability, was necessary to address when discussing origins and the 'need to know'. Though this remains a stalwart feature of superhero narratives, thus perpetuating the idea that extraordinary bodies require an explanation or pathologisation, characters like the Joker in *TDK* (to whom this thesis has given considerable coverage) signify how the origin story tradition can be manipulated by writers to subvert expectations and promote new, exciting narratives.

To return to the introduction, which was a crucial foundation of context for the analysis that followed, it was important to recognise the cultural context of the comic-book as source material for many origin stories translated to the screen. This included not only Captain America's function as an important political, patriotic symbol of Jewish rebellion during the Second World War, but also the transition to screen fuelled the potential for military propaganda for contemporary warfare, which was done through analysis of the wider MCU as a propaganda piece for the US Department of Defense. Both military politics and disability politics were essential backgrounds for building on the importance of the origin story. To understand why origins are imperative to the disabled narrative, I discussed the historical oppression of disabled

people and how they are played on screen. Within the context of superhero films, which as the introduction discussed often present bodies of a different (though still 'abnormal') appearance and form, it was important that I cover the idea of 'cripping up' when theorising super-bodies as disabled bodies. Despite super-bodies not being disabled as disability is known in the actual-world, the metaphor of disability that is abundant in superhero films means that actors who choose to portray these roles often undergo a transformative process to become their characters: to become all at once 'super' and 'abnormal'.

Through a feminist lens, I considered Black Widow in Chapter Two: Performance, whose disability is tied to her gender and patriarchal norms of childbearing, as a character who changes her allegiance from villain to hero and how this impacts her sterilised status. Her case study, which presented one of the most overtly-feminised portrayals of disability in superhero films, was valuable particularly in its invisibility: even though it cannot be seen, her absent uterus makes Black Widow feel herself that she is a monster, that she is evil. The production of villainy from within the self is an essential facet of her character, and the societal views of a woman's duty work alongside the view of disfigurement and disability to create her self-loathing, her image of herself as a monster. Within superhero films in general, the performance of both disability and of the hero and villain archetypes combine to produce a presentation that can indicate to the viewer, typically visually, of key details about the character within the superhero genre: if they have a facial scar or missing limb, for example, these are common disabilities used to indicate evil motives. Black Widow's disfigurement is different: by being invisible, it is able to be used as a plot device – as narrative prosthesis – as a dramatic reveal partway through her fourth appearance in the MCU. It enables her allegiance to be questioned by the audience, who unconsciously associate her disfigurement with villainy. When disability and disfigurement are used in this way, it strengthens the associations that can be made with these features in the actual-world, one which is far more complex than a hero-villain binary. That is not to say that superhero films present an entirely negative view of disability: some narratives can have positive impact, especially in the case of *TDK's* Joker, who actively disregards disability stereotypes such as the origin

story. On the other hand, the requirements of the action genre that superhero films fall under means that often character portrayals disregard common actual-world disability issues, especially with mobility aids and prostheses. Bucky Barnes' cybernetic arm never malfunctions to a critical point, nor does it run out of power (indeed it is not shown how the arm is powered). The advanced technology is shown in one scene in *The Winter Soldier* (2014) to be able to do small repairs, such as re-arranging plates, automatically. Professor X's motorised wheelchair similarly is never stuck nor stranded without power. Even Rhodey, who is paralysed below the waist in 2016's *Civil War*, is relatively quickly able to walk again through a pair of bionic leg supports developed by Tony Stark. His actual-world disability problem is quickly solved and is erased from the narrative. This disability version of plot armour, like how weapons in action films never seem to run out of ammunition, is essential to the superhero narrative: these are not conventional disability films and therefore it would not be feasible to expect them to show the daily struggles of those with bionic limbs or powerchairs. Superhero films do not show the more mundane disability frustrations that actual-world people with those disabilities experience, often daily, but to do so would distance the films from the superhero genre. These films function as a soft launch of ideas surrounding disability. Chapter Two tracked how powers and especially disfigurements often start a character on a pre-determined track to become super. Disfigurements function to mar the visage and signify a 'ruined subjectivity' (Barounis, 2013, p.317), making them a common feature of film villains. Whilst superhero films are no exception to this long-time tradition of scarred villains, alongside other action films like the James Bond franchise, more recently films have sought to challenge this representation. Characters like Black Widow and Bucky Barnes, who have internal and external disfigurements, are classified as heroes for most of their screen time. Though their redemption narratives suggest the need to atone, both for fighting for the wrong side and for their disfigurements, the fact that the reveals of their disfigurements come after the films establish them as heroes makes the viewer root for them to overcome and return to their heroic status. Exploration of the film format as a popular form of entertainment based around showcasing extraordinary bodies related it to the freak show.

The promotion of heroes, including costumes, names, and performative character traits (seen in within-film interviews, press conferences, and interactions with non-super people), creates the spectacle of the superhero that we observe both within the films and outside of them in promotions and advertising.

If super-people are intended as larger-than-life, fantastical creations, it therefore makes sense that they serve not to explicitly perform disability narratives. Instead the superhero genre shows a nuanced take on disability communicated to a mass audience across the spectrum of age. Films with explicit disability narratives, such as 2004's *Million Dollar Baby*, a boxing-film-turned-paraplegic-euthanasia-story, and 2014's *The Theory of Everything*, a Stephen Hawking biopic, cannot claim this same level of mass appeal. The combined worldwide earnings of both films only reach around \$350million, which is a fraction of what many superhero films generate (Box Office Mojo **a/b**, 2022), and although earnings do not always dictate a film's success, the profit margin compared to superhero films speaks volumes about what the mass market viewer chooses to consume. They appear to be much more comfortable with the more implicit references to disability seen in superhero films than they are with the brutal euthanasia seen in *Million Dollar Baby*, or even the realities of Stephen Hawking's ALS experience in *The Theory of Everything*. Actual-world disability, such as Rhodey's paralysis, is not given significant attention in superhero films, and is often given a quick fix, 'solved' (Hsy, 2015, p.28) as to focus on the more fantastical narratives. I have demonstrated how Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker in Nolan's *TDK* (2008) is a striking example of disability and disfigurement that breaks conventions, both of actual-world disability and of the superhero-world norms. He defies the stalwart feature of the origin and power, subverting the expectations of the superhero genre and actual-world audiences. He defies notions of disability as disabling: instead, he appears to be 'endlessly mobile, never stalled or confounded by Gotham City's built environment' (Barounis, 2013, p.314). Building on Barounis, I have argued throughout this thesis that the Joker is one of the characters who best exemplifies disability and disfigurement in comic-book adaptations: he not only recognises disability

stereotypes and facets of the genre but tackles them head-on to maintain agency and control his, and the film's, narrative.

Superhero films are a form of escapism, making them an essential cultural zeitgeist of the twenty-first century, however inextricable from them are messages and values that we see in the actual-world. The systemic failures of governmental structures (social work in *Joker*, crime in *TDK*) are recognisable features of these films that reflect political and economic ideas in the actual-world. These universes may be fictional, but their base in truth cannot be detached from our reality, making them an apt place to explore issues below the surface of the fantastical. Rather than being a mirror in which the viewer must, sometimes with discomfort, directly confront the issues they see both on and off screen, superhero films utilise metaphor to create an environment where the ideas of non-disabled people around disability and bodies can be developed. Though not always a disability-positive portrayal, the superhero genre as a popular form of content marks an important starting point for many to explore extraordinary bodies and dispel the common myths surrounding them, first in the fictional world, then in the actual-world. The mass appeal of the genre offers an important opportunity, though not currently capitalised on, to subtly communicate disability ideas to a wider audience in a format that appeals to them. Work has already begun by writers to dispel the need to account for origins and highlight the often personal and invasive nature of this, as seen in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, and this offers a promising future in a film genre that not only highlights extraordinary bodies but celebrates them.

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