

# **Death, Gender, and Superheroes.**

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# Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore the significance of death in comic books and examine how these representations are said to inform or reinforce cultural views of masculinity and femininity. Using an interdisciplinary, mixed method approach, this thesis utilised photo elicitation via synchronous digital focus groups and a compositional interpretation compiled by the researcher to engage with visual representations of death in order to reveal how these representations are understood by audiences. This thesis demonstrates that there are identifiable differences in the ways that men and women are represented in death. Differences tied to these representations that function to reinforce outdated heteronormative stereotypes regarding both masculinity and femininity. Additionally, this thesis argues that superheroic masculinity and, by extension, the superheroic death, are underpinned by hegemonic masculinity. Within this framework, the deaths of male superheroes are broadly understood as superheroic with participants positioning male superheroes as agentic subjects characterised by demonstrations of heroic action and strength. Furthermore, this thesis reveals that the deaths of female superheroes are characterised by objectification. This functions to deny female superheroes their superheroic status by situating them as violable, sexual objects and undermining their capacity for agency and autonomy, thus positioning the superheroic death as unobtainable.

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# Author's Declaration

*I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.*



# Chapter One: Introduction

My interest in comics began with Marcia Williams' *Greek Myths for Young Children* (1991). Checked in and out from the local library, *Greek Myths* was a collection of myths reimagined for younger audiences as comic strips, and I loved it, but this love could only last so long as it was appropriate for me to be reading books from the children's section. I was a voracious reader, who read far above my age range, so while my interest in comics remained, there was nothing age-appropriate with which to satisfy it. I did not know anyone who read comics, I did not live near any shops that sold comics beyond, of course, the local newsagent that always stocked the *Beano* and the *Dandy* - comics that I had read but felt no particular affection for - and, as a result, comics left my sphere of reading. In their absence I began to mythologise them. In theory, I knew they existed. I had seen them in *Forbidden Planet* on days out in Bristol. I knew that the cartoons and movies I was watching, and even some of the clothes I was wearing, were based on them but still they felt out of reach. Inaccessible, not just physically but psychologically. I had decided at some point that comic books were not for me and then I had forgotten about them, focusing instead on the fantasy and science fiction novels found on my mother's bookshelves.

This changed during my undergraduate degree. In 2008 I met Luke, who worked in the local comic book shop and had the largest collection of comics I had seen outside of the movies. I was curious, but with decades of material I had no idea where to start. I spent a lot of time just looking, I had no intention of reading them, of breaking my self-imposed comic book abstinence, I just wanted to be able to look at them as often and for as long as I was permitted. Eventually Luke took the initiative and handed me a stack of trade paperbacks he thought I would like the best - *Doom Patrol*, *Casanova*, *The Authority* - and I was hooked.

I took things a step further in November 2014 when I responded to a tweet from a website looking to expand its pool of comic book reviewers. They were trying to diversify, searching for women, people of colour, and LGBTQ people with opinions and a unique voice. I had no experience writing in public or for a sort of audience beyond my undergraduate lecturers, but by this point I had read a lot of comics and I certainly had more than my fair share of opinions. My application was accepted, and my first review was published in December that year - *Gotham Academy* #3.

Following this I wrote for a wide range of websites, contributing multiple reviews a week, personal essays and cultural critique, interviews of writers and artists, news round ups, and most recently annotations explicating on jokes, cultural references, and other Britishisms in *Giant Days*. It was writing for these sites that allowed me to find community within comics, which led to co-writing and publishing my own comic. Similarly, it was writing for these sites that allowed me to develop as a writer and a critic. It was also writing for these sites that led to the events that conspired to influence this research project.

The first of these events was my introduction to the term 'fridging'. A colloquial term, derived from the title of a website - women in refrigerators. The site serves to list every instance in which a superheroine is "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" (Simone, 1999) for the purpose of inspiring a male counterpart to some kind of heroic action. The title makes reference to an incident in DC Comics *Green Lantern* volume 3, issue 54, published in August 1994 in which the hero, Kyle Raynor, returns home to find that his girlfriend Alexandra DeWitt has been killed by the villain Major Force and stuffed into his refrigerator. DeWitt did not need to die to prove that Major Force was a villain, nor to create a hero out of Raynor, but that's the point. DeWitt, like so many female characters, was disposable, and while the manner of disposal in this case is unique, the reason for it was commonplace. So commonplace, in fact, that people were able to develop a term like 'fridging'; a term that would travel through fan spaces to become part of everyday comic book vernacular.

The second instance came while reviewing comic books. I had been assigned an issue of a book called *Wolf Moon*, a horror comic about werewolves. Now don't get me wrong, I love werewolves, but this book rubbed me up the wrong way and this was reflected in the review I submitted. It was only really one scene, it may have been a single panel, but in it, the main character, who was suffering from some manner of mental health issue, kept seeing the people he was interacting with as having been brutalised by the aforementioned werewolves. On entering a strip club, he perceives the women dancing as having been flayed open, not the barman or the patrons, just the dancers. The sexualisation of violence on that page felt so egregious and yet it was so easily explained away as being a convention of the horror genre and my response, therefore, was expected. But I wasn't responding to the horror, I was responding to how normal it felt to see women represented this way and the normality of it made me angry. This anger was reflected in a review that attempted to engage with the sexualisation of violence against women. The first draft was neither well developed nor well received. My editor thought that I was accusing the creators of condoning this violence, but I think I was accusing the whole world. I rewrote the section of the review three times before it was accepted and the version that ran had further changes that I did not approve of or agree to. I'm still angry, partially because of the dismissal I felt at the hands of my editor, but also partially because of my own inability to articulate what I was seeing and how this related to culture more broadly.

These moments stand out to me as foundational in both narrowing my focus and guiding my interests towards visual representations of death, in interrogating their significance beyond their role as call to action or cheap titillation.

## 1.1 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of the research is to explore representations of death in superhero comic books as an important and far-reaching form of popular culture. It will examine them as significant conveyors of cultural values as they pertain to gender and power.

Ultimately the research and its findings seek to expand and contribute to the fields of visual sociology, death studies, and comic book studies.

In order to explore the role of death in comic books and a particular focus on gendered representations, this thesis will address the following research questions:

- *What is the significance of death in comic books?*
- *Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?*
- *How do gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?*

These questions seek to understand the role played by representations of death beyond their function as narrative devices, the utility of representing men and women differently, and the meanings these differences hold for audiences. In answering these questions consideration will be made of the ways in which representations of death are gendered and how they reflect the values of culture in which they are created.

## 1.2 Thesis Chapters

This thesis will begin with a review of the relevant literature in chapter two. The chapter will start by framing the comic book as a cultural artefact worthy of study with an overview of research from within the growing field of comic studies that demonstrates both the utility and significance of the comic book as a source of data and a site for sociological analysis. This will be followed by considerations of the debates surrounding the use of the image as data within the fields of sociology and visual sociology. This chapter will then move to address theoretical perspectives of

visuality and the gaze with a particular focus of the morbid gazes (Pierson, 2010; Penfold-Mounce, 2016), in addition to Mulvey's (2009) male gaze and May's (2009) necro-gaze. Following this, this chapter will address the role of narrative as it relates to understandings of death with attention paid to the concept of the good death (Kellerhear, 2007). This will be followed by an overview of literature pertaining to the role and significance of gender within comic books and the superhero genre. Finally, this chapter engages with research regarding gender and visual representations of death as they occur within both popular and high culture more broadly. By engaging with this literature and the debates therein, this chapter serves to position this thesis within the broader fields of visual sociology, death studies, and comic book studies and highlights the gaps to which this thesis will respond.

Chapter three will elucidate the research methods and design utilised within this thesis, outlining a constructivist, interdisciplinary, and mixed methods approach that is reflected in the use of photo elicitation via synchronous digital focus groups. This is designed to mimic the online discussion held by though engaged with comic book fandom that makes use of the researchers own position as a fan-scholar within these conversations and networks. In addition to focus group data, this thesis will also make use of a series of compositional interpretations compiled by the researcher in response to the dataset - twenty comic book covers with a focus on death and dying. This chapter will begin by explicating this methodological approach and situating the researcher within the research. This will be followed by an explanation of the research design and its rationale. Following this, this chapter will expand upon the methods used to identify and select a data set and the analytic procedures to be applied. Next, this chapter will outline the procedures utilised in conducting synchronous digital focus groups. This will include information regarding participant recruitment, focus group composition, and focus group moderation. This will then highlight the analytic approach to be utilised and applied in subsequent chapters of this thesis. Finally, this chapter will present any ethical considerations that may need to be taken into advisement whilst conducting this research.

Representing the first of three analytic chapters, Chapter four addresses the role of narrative in informing audience responses to deaths mediated through comic books. The central argument of this chapter is that participants understand the role of death as being linked to its narrative function. This chapter analyses participant accounts of deaths that have stood out to them as memorable and highlights the recurrent acknowledgments of the differences in how men, women, and people of marginalised genders are represented in death. This chapter also argues for the creation of new typologies from which to discuss superheroic death.

Conceived as parallel chapters, Chapters five and six address the significance of gender as it informs the superheroic death. With a focus on masculinity, Chapter five develops upon the assertion that there is an identifiable difference in the ways that men, women, and people of marginalised genders are represented in death. Central to this chapter is the argument that superheroic masculinity and, by extension, the superheroic death, are underpinned by hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This is demonstrated through an analysis of participant responses to visual representations of the male superheroic death alongside a compositional interpretation and analysis. Expanding upon these findings, Chapter six moves its focus on to the deaths of female superheroes. The key argument of this chapter is that the deaths of female superheroes are characterised by objectification, which serves to position the superheroic death, as theorised in chapter four, as unobtainable.

Chapter seven will conclude this thesis by addressing the research questions posed within the introduction. Additionally, this chapter will present the findings of this thesis, highlighting the key arguments and any wider implications. This chapter will also demonstrate the ways in which this thesis contributes to the broader fields of visual sociology, death studies, and comic book studies. Finally, this chapter will consider the limitations of the research and explore the potentialities of future research.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

The comic book industry currently boasts a market valuation of \$9.21 billion (Fortune Business Insights, 2022) and superheroes continue to claim the majority share of the mainstream market (Smith, 2016: 130). However, the impact of the comic book market extends far beyond its financial successes. Both Marvel comics and DC Comics, for example, boast global readerships (Alverson, 2022), and serve as the inspiration for numerous television adaptations and movie franchises (Marvel Entertainment, 2022), and several entertainment licences that range from toys to homewares (Block, 2014). This global reach exemplifies comic books, and in particular the superhero genres, influence on the “global cultural landscape” (Aldama, 2020: xi).

Within the contemporary popular imagination comic books and the superhero genre are largely synonymous despite the superhero genre representing only a fraction of the comic books produced. Rooted in the pulp fiction magazines of the early 1900s, the superhero genre blended action, adventure, crime, and science fiction to produce heroes such as Superman, who was based on “pulp heroes, such as Doc Savage, and science fiction, such as *The Gladiator* by Philip Wylie,” (Inge, 2016:13) and introduced in *Action Comics* in 1938. It was Superman’s success that in addition to several imitations led to the creation of Batman in 1939, and both Captain America and Wonder Women in 1940 and “helped establish comic books as a mass medium,” (Smith, 2016: 129).

Despite mounting criticism from the literary critic Sterling North, anti-comics educators, and the Catholic Church, comic books and the superhero genre remained popular (Nyberg, 2016). However, this popularity began to wane following the release of *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) written by psychiatrist Dr. Frederic Wertham and the resulting implementation of the Comics Code later that same year. The Comic’s Code functioned similarly to the Motion Picture Production or ‘Hays’

code and provided guidelines regarding the handling of crime and horror specifically as well as more “general standards for all comics and included rules for dialogue and costume, along with guidelines for handling religion, marriage, and sex.” (Nyberg, 2016: 28). Following its implementation, comics publishing saw a sharp decline which led to requests that the regulations be re-evaluated. While this re-evaluation was rejected, this comic industry began to recover with the creators of the 1960s developing “new material and new approaches to existing genres” (Nyberg, 2016: 28) which led to both a revitalization of the superheroes of the 1930s and 1940s and a wave of new superheroes that “challenged the social norms the Comic’s Code had been written to uphold,” (Nyberg, 2016: 28). This once again led to an increase in the popularity of the superhero genre and by “the mid-1960s comic books became fashionable,” (Gabilliet, Beaty, and Nguyen, 2010: 59). The comic book market and the superhero genre continued to grow throughout the 1970s and by the mid-1980s the superhero genre had once again reasserted its “dominance over the comic book marketplace,” (Smith, 2016: 130). These successes continued throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s which saw the popularity of comics and specifically the superhero genre rise exponentially.

The visibility borne of comic books increased popularity consequently led to a growing legitimacy within the academy and the emergence of comics studies as a recognisable, albeit limited, field of study. Comic studies emergence during the 1980s (Ndalialis, 2011) paralleled the renewed interest in comics from mainstream audiences that followed the successful introduction of “manga and anime to western culture and the rise of comic book auteurs like Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Art Spiegelman” (Ndalialis, 2011: 114). However, the path to the legitimisation of comics studies was not always so clear. Writing on value of comic books with academic study, Ndalialis (2011) highlights that,

Negative attitudes towards the study of comics has historical roots tied specifically to the comic book form... the comic book’s early association with the superhero genre (with the introduction of Superman in Action Comics 1938) brought with it a large, youth oriented audience. Despite its immense



popularity, the public perception for a long time was that comics were a kids medium - or more specifically, a young boys medium. As such it was generally perceived (in higher circles of course) as the lowliest of popular culture media (Ndalialis, 2011: 113).

In positioning comic books, and in particular those within the superhero genre, as the lowest of popular culture whilst simultaneously recognising their vast cultural impact, we are able to consider them alongside other 'glossy topics' (Beer and Penfold-Mounce, 2010). That is, topics that sit demonstrably within the realm of public interest but "are perhaps not considered to be of public value" (Beer and Penfold-Mounce, 2010: 363). It is thus that scholars engaged with comics broadly, and the superhero genre specifically, are often tasked with demonstrating the value of their research interests. Such authors expound on the ways that comic books present an underutilised source of empirical data that can be applied interdisciplinarily across multiple fields of study, and representative of the 'world of icons' which "represent ideas, concepts and philosophies" (McCloud 1994: 27). Smith, (2011) suggests a different approach, instead arguing that "academics need to assert that they can study comics (as complex texts, as industrially produced objects, as culture in circulation) without making excuses for their devalued status" (ibid.:111). He argues that it is through the production of "complex scholarly work on comics without apology, work that indisputably provides insights... that will be the most powerful justification" (ibid:111). Examples of the insights that the scholarly engagement with comics can provide are plentiful. For example, Miller's (2017) work considers the difficulties inherent in visually representing asexuality in contemporary comics. Here, Miller situates comics as a medium "well-equipped to challenge hegemonic identity narratives in popular culture" whilst equally "capable of reifying those same narratives" (2017: 356). Similarly insightful is Bukac's (2022) examination of cultural citizenship and gendered national identities in superhero narratives, which recognises superhero comics "potential to construct a shared space of meanings encapsulated within the national or public sphere" (2022: 24). Further research examines the use of comic books as pedagogical tools, for example Classon-Frangos's (2021) article considering the parallel development of feminist comics and norm critical pedagogy in Sweden which posits that if "comics can be seen as its

own mode of thought, then comics' pedagogy can be considered not so much an approach to teaching comics as objects of study, but rather to using comics to think and theorize about the world" (2021: 3). While these examples represent only a tiny percentage of the work currently being conducted within the field of comics studies, they provide clarity as to both the value and scope of the field. They emphasise that scholars involved with comics studies are engaged with "an active critical discourse about what constitutes the form of the medium, its language, the way it images its readers, and its cultural, social, and historical impact" (Ndalialis, 2011: 116).

Despite comic books' apparent ubiquity within popular culture, and the broad scope with which they have been integrated into academia, there has been little academic inquiry into the significance of death, particularly with regards to superheroes, or the gendered representations thereof. One notable example comes in the form of Alaniz's 2014 work on disability and death which presents case studies of well-known characters in order to "shed light on the structuring principles of the super-body," (Alaniz, 2014: 25). Current debates regarding the intersection of comics books and gendered representations of death instead sit within the arena of fan driven discourse and critique.

In order to better position this thesis within the fields of visual sociology, death studies and comic book studies, this chapter will address the literature pertaining to the key debates informing the research questions. Defined broadly, this chapter will therefore investigate literature as it concerns the following areas of study:

- Visuality and the gaze
- Narrative and death
- Gender and superheroes

- Death and gender

Prior to this however, this chapter will address the value of the image as a source of sociological data, particularly those generated within popular culture. Thus, positioning comic books, and by extension their covers, as a culturally significant locus from which to discuss the significance of death in popular culture and highlight its role in reinforcing cultural views of power and agency.

## 2.1 The Image as Data

The role and utility of visual data, or images, within the social sciences and in particular within sociology, is contentious at best. For many,

Assessing the place of visual data within the social sciences is made difficult by the fact that there is no unanimity about either what the term should embrace or - more significantly - how such data are to be incorporated into these disciplines' analytical concerns (Emmison and Smith, 2000: 1).

This contention is most prominent with regards to visual sociology, a sub-field with roots in documentary photography and filmmaking. Visual sociology approaches the visual as 'representational', as a means of communicating descriptions and analyses of social realities (Becker, 2007). Here, "representations take the form of *an argument*, a presentation of just that material that makes the points the maker wants to get across and no more" (Becker, 2007: 26). The value of the visual and its representational quality is further supported by Harper (2012) who argues that,

the world that is seen, photographed, drawn or otherwise represented visually is different than the world that is represented through words and numbers. As a result, visual sociology leads to new understandings and insights because it connects to different realities than do conventional empirical research methods (2012: 4).

However, it is these visual representations with which “many traditional sociologists take issue” (Becker, 2007: 191). Critics claim that “since visual imagery has not been conventional in sociology since its beginning ... they do not accept the obligation; seeing few legitimate uses for visual materials, other than as ‘teaching aides’” (Becker, 2007: 191). However, much of what is now commonplace within society was not conventional since sociology's beginnings, the internet for example, and if nothing more, as Harper (2012) suggests, a “visual approach can invigorate a discipline that is increasingly abstract and distant from the world it seeks to understand” (2012: 4). Visual approaches, however, are not limited to those within visual sociology, or even those who are primarily concerned with the representational nature of images, that is their ability to communicate a sociological argument. For example, those engaged within the interdisciplinary fields of visual culture and cultural studies seek to address their research concerns not by making images as is the case with visual sociology, but by examining those that already exist, that “have been made to be looked at” (Walker and Chaplin, 1997: 22).

Cultural studies, a field emerging from the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), situated the study of culture as key to “exposing relations of power that exist within society at any given moment in order to consider how marginal, or subordinate groups might secure or win, however temporarily, cultural space from the dominant group” (Proctor, 2004:2). Culture here is a broad term that moves beyond the binary definitions of ‘high’ and ‘low’. Instead, culture is viewed as,

both a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass produces commodities, and so forth (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, 1992: 6)

This is echoed by Hall (1996: 439) who describes culture as “the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society (...) the contradictory forms of ‘common sense’ which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life”. It is through this conception that popular culture is able to be situated as “an area of serious, even ‘popular’ academic enquiry” (Proctor, 2004: 12). Here, popular culture is viewed as “the site at which everyday struggles between dominant and subordinate groups are fought, won and lost” (Proctor, 2004: 12). While comic books were not the exemplar of popular culture championed within the school, their approaches and methods remain applicable across media. Most notable of these was presented in Hall’s ‘Encoding/Decoding’ (1996). Created with televised media in mind, this presented an alternative to the linear ‘sender-message-receiver’ of mass communications which suggests that “the sender creates the message and fixes its meaning which is then communicated directly and transparently to the recipient” (Proctor, 2004: 59). Hall took issue with this model, in part due to his interest in the “way different audiences generate rather than discover meaning.” In developing an alternative,

Hall challenged all three components of the mass communications model, arguing that (i) meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender; (ii) the message is never transparent; and (iii) the audience is not a passive recipient of meaning (Proctor, 2004: 59).

Hall’s revised model for mass communication, of which it is important to note was merely hypothetical, situates itself as a circuit rather than a linear process by which messages are encoded by a ‘producer’, they are then circulated that is to say, televised or printed, this is followed by the meaningful decoding by consumers. It is

at this stage that meaning is made, however these meanings do not always follow or correspond to the message that were originally encoded. Categorised as dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional, these positions form as a result of the multitude of ways a message may be decoded, which is to say understood by its consumers. The dominant-hegemonic position is the desired decoding, the reading that aligns precisely with the producer's encoding. The negotiated position suggests that consumers are able to acknowledge the dominant encoding but exhibit some opposition to the reading. The oppositional position, however, demonstrates a complete rejection of the intended decoding, which is not to suggest that consumers are unable to understand the dominant encoding, but rather they have acknowledged them and chosen to oppose them fully. For example, Hall posits a scenario by which “the viewer hears reports of the wage freeze but decodes every reference to ‘national interest’ as ‘class interest’” (Proctor, 2004: 70).

In addition to their position within popular culture, comic books represent a medium that has not only ‘been made to be looked at’ but made to be interpreted by its audience. Describing the cognitive process required to interpret a comic book panel, Kukkonen (2013) notes that one must assimilate, “the facial expressions, gestures, and the postures of the characters, their speech, the layout of the image, and many other features” (2013: 7). It is through these interpretations, that could be categorised similarly to Hall’s position from which decodings can be made, that further inferences can be made that speak to societies and cultures in which these representations are produced. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the messages encoded within comic books mirror the moods and politics of the times in which they are created (Gibson, Huxley, and Ormrod, 2015a), deconstructing and recontextualising the messages of the day via visual means in the form of entertainment. When we consider that this is done visually and we are already aware that images work “cumulatively and unconsciously to create and reinforce a particular worldview or ideology that shapes our perspectives and beliefs about the world and ourselves’ (Meyers, 2008: 3) it becomes important for sociologists to consider what impact these images are having. Which worldviews or ideologies are shaping beliefs under the guise of superhero fiction?

Unlike the interior of a comic book which is designed to convey narrative, a comic book cover's initial purpose is to serve as the point of sale, front facing in both brick-and-mortar and online shops, comic book covers stand as a consumer's first impression. As a site of academic inquiry, comic book covers have been approached in a variety of novel ways, predominantly informed by narrative concerns. Kachorsky and Reid (2020) for example examined the covers of graphic novels that had been adapted from popular young adult novels in order to establish how these covers use "visual and textual resources to represent the story and/or the text?" (2020: 69). Further narrative enquiry can be found in Brown and Vodopyanova's (2017: 137) study of "how representative comic book covers are of the content found within the inside pages". Another approach to the study of comic book covers can be found in Juricevic and Horvath's (2016: 6) analysis of "how a sample of Silver Age (1956–1971) and Bronze Age (c. 1970–1985) comic book artists depict motion". This took into consideration both literal and metaphorical devices such as body orientation and action lines and how they communicate motion to audiences. Additionally insightful is Cook's (2015) analysis of Marvel Comics use of photo covers in the 1980s and the meta-fictional means of communication they provide. However, despite the insightful and rich analyses that have been produced via the study of comic book covers as evidenced above, they continue to be overlooked in favour of research focusing on interiors. Similarly, very little has been produced that examines their content in relation to the cultures in which they are produced or the ideological frameworks they can be said to uphold. This is equally true of representations of death within popular culture and as "superheroes die, or at least appear to die, much more frequently on covers than they do within interior pages" (Cook, 2015: 18), comic book covers provide a uniquely under-utilised site from which to position my own research. In positioning comic book covers as a marketing tool analogous with advertising it becomes possible to engage with the covers in ways similar to those that have previously been used to research advertisements in studies such as Goffman's (1979) *Gender Advertisements*, and Winship's (1980) *Advertising in Women's Magazines*. As an aspect of mass culture, advertisements, and by extension comic book covers, play a role in "the circulation and securing of dominant ideological representations and definitions" (Hall, 1996: 118) and as such can be used to

examine how these representations and definitions have been naturalised or made to appear normative. Goffman (1979), for example refers to these representations as 'displays', a 'simplified, exaggerated and stereotyped' act by which all of "an individual's behaviour and appearance can inform those who witness them, telling them something about their social identity, mood, intent, expectations and of their relationship to the witness" (1979: 1). Much like the advertisements studied by Goffman, comic book covers can be positioned as equally active sites of data as they too frequently reproduce idealised versions of masculinity and femininity that rely on stereotypes, and other socially constructed understandings of how gender is performed and have the potential to be used to demonstrate the culturally ingrained stereotypes that inform gender 'displays' in contemporary media.

It is evident that by opening sociology to the study of visual data especially that which is consumed en masse, allows consideration of the messages that are being propagated, how they "are produced, what they encode and how they are consumed and opens up a vein of data that richly complements the types of information social scientists usually mine," (Knowles & Sweetman, 2018: 18). Images and visual media can transcend language barriers and "it is possible for them to contain multiple meanings and sustain multiple interpretations" (Knowles & Sweetman, 2018: 20). When paired "with the sorts of questions [social scientists] routinely entertain, [they] should be able to find fascinating, and important information even in seed catalogues." (Knowles & Sweetman, 2018: 23). While social science may have remained indifferent to the visual (Emmison and Smith, 2000), a lack of visual literacy or a paucity in the sociological imagination should not result in a plethora of information being cast off, but rather push toward a novel avenue of inquiry because regardless of one's approach to visual material it cannot be disputed that "the world has never been more visually aware and visually engaged" (Harper, 2012: 7).

## 2.2 Visuality and The Gaze



Visuality, rather than the physiological category of vision, describes “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and unseeing therein” (Foster, 1988: ix). Visuality represents the politicisation of looking, bestowing power on the looker, and is intricately tied to knowledge. Jenks (1995a), for example, argues that “looking, seeing, and knowing have become perilously entwined” (1995a: 1), echoing Fyfe and Law’s (1988a) claims that “depiction, picturing and seeing are ubiquitous features of the process by which most human beings come to know the world as it really is for them” (1988: 2). Power, as it manifests through practices of looking, can be explained using theories of the gaze. The Gaze (hooks, 2010; Mulvey, 2009; Pierson, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011) can be characterised as “not the act of looking itself but the viewing relationship characteristic of a particular set of social circumstances” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002: 76). Due to the varied nature of social circumstances there is no singular gaze but rather many complex and often intersecting gazes all of which share the commonality of being ‘constructed in relationship to [their] opposite’ (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 3). That is with regards to differences between the spectator and their subject for example gender, race, class, or age. It is through this commonality that we are able to utilise the gaze to freely to examine the power dynamics of both the institutions that contribute to societal power differentials and the narrower social interactions such as those between spectators and their subject.

Institutional gazes, such as the medical gaze (Foucault, 2012) have the capacity to establish relationships of power and to affect the individuals within them, along with an inspecting gaze and a normalising gaze, both of which are enacted in social and institutional contexts through frameworks of power (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002). Foucault believed images to be integral to systems of power proposing concepts which can be used to consider the relation of images and power, most notably biopower, and panopticism (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002). Biopower refers to the “mechanisms and tactics of power focused on life (that is to say, individual bodies and populations),” (Genel, 2006: 43). This is enacted and regulated through the gaze, both the external inspecting, medical gaze, and the internalised regulatory gaze. In internalising this gaze “each individual is thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself” (Foucault, 1980: 155). The body in this instance is further

regulated through the circulation of images that depict ideal bodies as envisioned by the state. Sturken and Cartwright (2002) further develop this point arguing that ,

Photographic images have been instrumental in the production of what Foucault called the docile bodies of the modern state – citizens who participate in the ideologies of the society through cooperation and a desire to fit in and conform. This happens in the vast array of media images that produce homogenous images for us of the perfect look, the perfect body, and the perfect pose. Because we as viewers of advertising images do not often think of the ways in which they are operating as ideological texts, these images often have the power to affect our self-images, this means that the norms of beauty and aesthetics which they resent, in standards that establish white and Anglo features as the desired look and thinness as the essential body type, can become part of the normalising gaze that viewers deploy upon themselves (2002: 98)

Panopticism (1995) expresses a further utilisation of the regulatory nature of the gaze. Here,

The panopticon is an architectural model, originally for a prison, that can be seen as a metaphor for the way in which power works. In the panopticon model, a central guard tower looks out on a circular set of prison cells, with the activities of each cell in full view of the tower. In this model, the building design produces a regulatory behavior [sic], because whether or not there are actually guards in the tower (this cannot be seen by the prisoners), the prisoners will feel that gaze upon them and regulate their behavior accordingly (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002: 98).

Building on Foucault's theories regarding panopticism (1995) and often used in tandem, is Mathisen's (1997) oppositional position synopticism, a visual criminology

perspective. Mathiesen (1997) argues the systems work in tandem as they are both trusted by the public to have their best interests in mind. He writes that:

Surveillance, panopticon, makes us silent about that which breaks fundamentally with the taken for granted because we are made afraid to break with it. Modern television, synopticon, makes us silent because we do not have anything to talk about that might initiate the break (Mathiesen, 1997: 231).

Mathiesen's understanding of synopticism as 'a total message system which inculcates or produces a general understanding of the world' (Mathiesen, 1997: 230) is supported by Surette (1992), who when talking about the public understanding of crime argues that, "People use knowledge they obtain from the media to construct a picture of the world, an image of reality on which they base their actions" (Surette, 1992: 1). This is a process sometimes referred to as the social construction of reality.

When considering the narrower applications, or those that exist between an individual spectator/subject, it is important to bear in mind that, as Urry and Larsen (2011) identified, the gaze is very much like language, one's eyes are socio-culturally framed and there are various 'ways of seeing'. People gaze upon the world through a particular filter or ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education. Gazing is a performance that orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world, (Urry & Larsen, 2011: 2). It is this socio-cultural framing that allows for so many discrete interpretations of the Gaze to exist and overlap. A popular and often cited example of one of the narrower applications would be Mulvey's approach to the 'male gaze'. In her essay *Visual Pleasure and narrative cinema*, Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory to identify the presence of the male gaze and the ways in which the 'unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (Mulvey, 2009: 14). Stating that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female

figure, which is styled accordingly (Mulvey, 2009: 19). In the classic western tradition of images, which was dominant throughout the history of painting, “men were depicted in action and women as objects to be looked at” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002: 81). In depicting men as in action, “male spectators may experience narcissistic identification with the images of male bodies being depicted... which therefore, allows the male spectator to retain a sense of power and control,” (Patterson and Elliott, 2002: 237). Critique of the male gaze and Mulvey’s practice comes from bell hooks in her essay entitled *The Oppositional Gaze* (hooks, 1993). hooks points out that Mulvey’s account fails to take into consideration the existence of black women and women of colour in general and both their portrayals in cinema and the ways in which they are prohibited from looking. Arguing that “Feminist film theory rooted in an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference,” such as that proposed by Mulvey, “actively suppresses recognition of race, re-enacting and mirroring the erasure of Black womanhood that occurs in films, silencing any discussion of racial difference – of racialized sexual difference” (hooks, 1993: 295).

When considering death, another set of gazes can be drawn upon. These morbid gazes (Penfold-Mounce, 2016) indulge our common desire for voyeurism. Examples can be found within Piersons (2010) “framework of gazes” (Penfold-Mounce, 2016: 24) which incorporates the voyeuristic, the abject, the forensic, and the autoptic gaze. Here the voyeuristic gaze “is closely associated with Freud’s notion of scopophilia, which is the pleasure involved in looking at other people’s bodies, especially as erotic objects,” (Pierson, 2010: 191). Penfold-Mounce (2015) expands upon this concept with regards to the dead arguing that,

Viewing the dead indulges the common drive for voyeurism, whereby the gaze focuses on viewing into the private lives of others often in their most intimate settings. It is where a person enjoys the pain and distress of others or is obsessively motivated to observe sordid or sensational subjects. The voyeuristic gaze can be conducted by different people with varying motivations including the academic such as the archaeologist, the sociologist,

psychologist, the anthropologist, and the physician; the investigative gaze of the police and the state; the informational gaze as possessed by the news media; the erotic peeping tom, predominantly men looking at the bodies of women. (2016: 24-5)

The abject gaze is linked to the voyeuristic gaze and “situated in Julia Kristeva’s (1982) conception of abjection as an omnipresent threat to self-identity and subjectivity,” (Pierson, 2010: 185). The abject both attracts and repulse, serving as “a profound, horrific reminder of one’s mortality and physical materiality,” (Pierson, 2010: 185). Unlike the voyeuristic and abject gazes, “the forensic gaze is not directly the viewer’s gaze but instead a lens through which the viewer sees. The viewer sees the corpse through the eyes of forensic scientists; it is the gaze of science” (Penfold-Mounce, 2016: 26). Subsequently, it is the forensic gaze that “dictates the methods of observation, techniques of documentation, and procedures for investigation,” (Pierson, 2010: 187), rather than the viewer. Finally, the autopic gaze is situated as “an interconnected combination of the other gazes... [it] is abject, voyeuristic and forensically inclined focusing on the eroticising process of the cadaver as a visual spectacle,” (Penfold-Mounce, 2016: 27). Expanding upon the links between the autopic gaze and the gendered gaze, Penfold-Mounce goes on to say that,

The gendered gaze is a lynchpin for the autoptic gaze in that it highlights that ‘the gaze’ is inescapably the male gaze and also the female gaze, meaning that women look at themselves through the male gaze. This gendered dimension to the autoptic gaze reiterates the processes that can be exerted through the gaze relating to gender and supporting the normalisation and objectification processes of the gaze upon death and dead people, (Penfold-Mounce, 2016: 27).

A further example of a morbid gaze with links to the gendered gaze can be found in May’s (2009) necro-gaze. In defining the necro gaze, May (2009) proposes that “corpses are inscribed not just as inert flesh and tissue, but as malleable, feminine,

pleasure providing and privilege affirming - as meant-to-be-opened beneath an inquisitive male gaze” (2009: 167). Underpinned by Mulvey’s (2009) male gaze, the necro-gaze is “meant to succinctly parcel together the erotic power and privilege differentials of a set of interaction with the dead,” (2009: 169-70). Expounding upon this May clarifies that,

The necro-gaze delineates a masculinised gaze directed at a dead subject or directed as a fantasy at a subject whom the gazer wishes dead for his benefit. Men in this paradigm hold the privilege of looking as well as the privilege of agency and action; they make meaning, (2009: 170).

Where this approach primarily focuses on the female corpse, May highlights the implications of the male corpse within this paradigm. Here male bodies,

Encode a form of masculinity that maintains its position of dominance in relation to ‘lesser’ masculinities. In cases involving male corpses, the act of penetration is demeaning, punishing and invasive because it is at the hands of a larger masculine force that feminises a male body through the act of penetration. And so it is the process of being made sub-masculine, more feminine because penetrable, that categorises the male body... Beneath the umbrella of class and legal disenfranchisement a pattern of treatment emerges where male bodies are generally depicted as raped and female bodies are frequently described as seduced. Doctors submit bodies to processes of aesthetic preservation that, male or female, render the bodies into feminised testimonials of the gendered skill of medical men, (May, 2009: 169).

Much like Foucault's examining, medical gaze, these gazes function to strip the identity and agency of the person, or in many cases the corpse being viewed. Spectators are no longer looking at a person, but merely an object that used to be a

person. These processes allow “the dying and dead body to be made visible, yet at the same time function to mask the material reality of embodied death,” (Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth, 1999: 24). They allow us to step past humanity and the initial shock of being confronted with death, something we are not usually permitted to view, something that within contemporary western culture is approached with hesitance in a safe and forgiving space. However, rather than creating space for discourse or discussion regarding dying and dead bodies, it can be argued that “the proliferation of representations of death only serves to reinforce our distance from it” (Hallam et al, 1999: 23), allowing these bodies to be observed while simultaneously concealing the realities of embodied death.

Conversely, the traditional death, as it existed prior to its medicalisation and as accounted for by Walter (1994), was very much a part of everyday life. People encountered death “frequently” (1994: 48) whether they wanted to or not. Mortality rates were high (1994: 48) and the majority of deaths, whether from sickness or injury, occurred within “the community” (1994: 51). Similarly, funereal processes such as cleaning and preparing the body for burial would take place at home under the care of (female) family members (Kellerhear, 2007). Outside of the home, public executions were not uncommon and, often considered a form of entertainment, were well attended. The result was that during the 18th and 19th centuries, within Europe, people were able to encounter death close up through both the lens of spectator/subject and in the wider context of institutional punishments. Alongside this was the ubiquity of death in art, and eventually other forms of media as the art of the ‘late Middle Ages and early modern period gave rise to disturbing scenes of violence’ (Decker and Kirkland-Ives, 2015: *foreword*). Religious artworks, for example, often depicted Jesus’ crucifixion or the saints’ martyrdoms in a variety of ways ranging from beatific to horrific and were very much a method of visual storytelling aimed toward an illiterate congregation. Unlike the deaths people encountered first hand, these deaths were shown as inspirational and noble; ‘heroes’ laying down their lives for the benefit of others, or because they refused to concede to their oppressors. These images acted as lessons in piety and suffering. Much like public executions, they were designed to be looked at, however in these cases the viewer was also expected to “feel along with the torments on display” (Decker and Kirkland-Ives,

2015:1). They were one more way of capturing the attention of the wider population and relaying a message either of religious or societal obedience.

Through the ending of public capital punishment in the United Kingdom and the rise of medicalisation, death, or at least in terms of one's proximity to a body, has been increasingly removed from the public gaze (Howarth, 2010). No longer something that routinely happens at home surrounded by family, death is now something that happens primarily behind closed doors in hospitals and hospices. The way in which death is presented here is devised to preserve the comfort of the onlookers - the family, friends, other patients, and healthcare practitioners. It is sanitised - bodies are cleaned and presented as though they were sleeping - with the intention of making the observer's experience as non-traumatic as possible. Howarth (2010), argues that the onus on wellbeing in this situation has less to do with honouring the dead and is more a by-product of assuring that those who are left behind do not suffer needlessly, or feel that they could have done more or tried harder. This suggests that within an institutional setting death is constructed with the aim of regulating spectators' reactions to it and, in turn, their understanding of it as something peaceful. As a result, the close up visual reality of human death has all but been removed from the majority of everyday lives in Western contexts and the observation of death in this manner is no longer the norm as people are now very often only in a position to witness "dying, not death" (Walter, 1994: 48).

However, despite 'the concealment of the realities of death and dying...popular culture increasingly focuses on the body in death' (Howson, 2013: 203) positioning it as a site of spectacle. In many ways 'death has replaced sex as a source of pornographic entertainment' (Howarth, 2010: 103) and as such it carries a similar sense of impropriety which has led to "the unrealistic and sensational representations of death and dying" (Howarth, 2010: 103) that are so common in contemporary visual media and popular culture. It is these sensational representations that this thesis intends to examine. However, it is not solely their sensational nature that inspires scrutiny. Rather the practices of looking, the gazes that one must employ to understand them because these "practices of looking are



intimately tied to ideologies” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002: 21). These are ideologies that are often obfuscated by the ‘understanding’ that popular culture is just entertainment and not to be taken seriously. However synoptic spaces, those that allow for the surveillance of the few by the many (Mathiesen, 1997), such as comics and other forms of popular media systematically belong to institutional elites (Mathiesen, 1997: 227). Comics, like other forms of media, aid in the social construction of reality and presenting, constructing and replicating popular ideologies of what is ‘good’ or ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ in terms of behaviour, appearance, gender, sexuality or in this case, representations of death. Similarly, many of the ideas of the panopticon and synopticon are replicated within the panels which also function as a synoptic device for the reader. While these are not always explicit, they are present and they assist in upholding a social status quo amongst its readership. A readership who “are trained to read for cultural codes such as aspects of the image that signify gendered, racial or class-specific meanings” (Sturken and Cartwright, 2002: 76).

This section considers theories of visuality and the gaze as they pertain to death. It makes note of changing norms with regards to how society views the practices linked to looking at death, both real and representational as in comic books, and the cultural codes these representations may communicate. As these cultural codes are often embedded within stories or narratives the next section will address narrative theory and how this further intersects with cultural understandings of death.

## 2.3 Narrative and Death

Narrative theory or narratology is in the simplest terms, the study of stories; how they are structured, how they are understood, and what effects they have on their audiences' understanding of the world around them. As such a narrative can be broadly defined as “somebody telling someone else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something” (Herman et al., 2012: 3). Narratives can be entirely fictional or in the case of personal narratives, the

product of lived experiences. The case with both, however, is their propensity to change over time, in the telling, and to whom they are told. Stories are not static and yet they function to “structure... that which we experience, creating order in disorder and establishing meaning in what can seem a meaningless situation,” (Gilbert, 2010: 224). The narratives found within fiction can be said to offer “opportunities to experience dangerous adventure, complex problems, difficult challenges (...) and anything else imaginable,” (Kottler, 2015: 165). In addition to providing a ‘safe’ way to encounter real world problems without the burden of real world consequences, Dickey (2016) highlights the capacity of narrative to transform something unsettling into something more stable stating that it “is the story that grounds the event” (5). This suggests that it is the act of storytelling, or the construction of a narrative regarding an event that gives it meaning and that it is only through the process of making something meaningful that people are able to experience the aforementioned adventures, challenges and problems.

Narrative constructions of death however, whether visual or textual, differ in that Bronfen’s (1992) statement of, “what is intensely real to the dying body is intensely unreal to the spectator” (45) holds true whether experienced through fiction, fact based narrative such as news reportage, or in person. Understandings of death are therefore not formed through direct experience, but rather are formed through narratives - some personal, and some mediated, whether purely fictional or based on fact. This can be seen through the use of narrative as a therapeutic device, often utilised to “help bereaved people make sense of loss” (Stelzer et al, 2019: 6) by introducing participants “to alternative possibilities for the ways that life experiences can be framed” (Kottler, 2015: 154). That is to say that the bereaved are encouraged to construct new ways of understanding life events, and by extension death, by considering the potentialities of other perspectives. However, as death has become increasingly private (Kellerher, 2007) and “dying and dead bodies continue to be removed from the direct gaze” (Hallam et al, 1999: 23), so have many of the lived experiences from which narratives regarding death are drawn. Instead these narratives are informed by and through encounters with death and dying as mediated through media and popular culture. While this can provide a “safe and acceptable way to explore death and the dead” (Penfold Mounce, 2016: 20), it is

important to remember that many, if not all of these narrative constructions are designed for entertainment. Even those based within fact aim to produce an element of spectacle, and are themselves a product of a “wound culture, fascinated with torn and open persons” (Seltzer, 1998: 1). They allow the audience to “hover between denial and acknowledgement” (Bronfen, 1992: 54).

It is within the narrative construction of death that understanding concerning the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death can be addressed. Beliefs surrounding the ideas and ideals associated with a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ death are neither clearly defined nor are they universal, (Kellerhear, 2007). Senses of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death can vary to a large degree depending on an individual's culture, religious beliefs, fears, or even their economic means, (Kellerhear, 2007). The concept of a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ death also changes depending on who is applying it - the individual, the caregivers, or the family. For example, individuals may consider factors such as having their affairs, financial or otherwise, in order, whereas caregivers may be more concerned with the level of care or comfort they feel they have provided during their role. Nevertheless, there is some agreement, for example, when discussing what constitutes a ‘good’ death it is generally agreed that some “degree of control over the death in terms of both location and timing” (Howarth, 2007: 134) is vital. Another key factor is dignity, often cited by those in favour of euthanasia and assisted suicide who believe that quality of life should be taken into consideration when making decision regarding end of life care (Seale, 1998). While there are many exceptions to the rule ‘bad’ deaths are generally viewed in opposite terms. This could be a sudden, and unexpected death, a death as the result of violence, or a death lacking in dignity, (Kellerhear, 2007). Unlike ‘good’ deaths which allow the individual a position of agency, a ‘bad’ death will more often than not situate the individual as a victim. The ‘bad’ death stands in contradiction to the expectation of dying naturally at the end of a long life (Howarth, 2007).

This section has examined existing literature as it relates to narrative and narrative constructions of death, particularly those within popular culture. It also takes into consideration theories concerning ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deaths. In order to support the

broad scope of this thesis the next section will provide an examination of literature as it pertains to gender and superheroes.

## 2.4 Gender and Superheroes

Historically, gender had been an important signifier within the narratives of comic books, especially those that fall within the superhero genre (Bongco, 1999, Baker and Raney, 2007), with notable changes to the “gender stylization of men and women” (Robbins, 2002: no pagination) occurring towards the end of the 20th century. Robbins (2002) argues that,

By the late 1980s, the almost entirely male mainstream comics artists began exaggerating certain sexual characteristics on both the male and female characters they drew. The males grew progressively more muscular, their necks thickened, while their heads grew smaller. The females on the other hand developed longer legs while their breasts attained incredible proportions, perfectly round in shape and often larger than their heads. To show off these bizarrely morphed bodies the artists clothes the women in bottom baring thong bikinis, with as little as possible on top, (2002: no pagination).

While these portrayals have become less extreme, the “illustrations continue to fetishise the female body to an almost pornographic level” (Brown, 2015: 184). In doing so, these portrayals predominantly served to “circulate, reinforce, and/or construct stereotypes of men as active and heroic subjects and women (or just parts of women) as objects valued for their sex appeal” (Cocca, 2014: 412). While the representation of female superheroes has increased – “as of 2016, the number of superhero comics starring female superheroes was at an all-time high of 12%” (Cocca, 2016: 1), normative understandings of gender performance, that is understandings that sit within a gender binary, remain largely intact. For example, male superheroes continue to be defined by their “muscularity and strength, as well

as their keen minds and problem-solving abilities," while female superheroes can be defined by their passivity (Seiter, 1993). However, the inclusion of more women has led to a "simultaneous unsettling of traditional gender norms (by a woman being portrayed as a strong subject) and reinforcement (by a woman being portrayed as a sexualised object) at the same time" (Cocca, 2014: 421). Despite this "the world of comics has generally come to be seen ... as one dominated by boys and men (and boy-like men)" (Chute, 2007: 278). Since there are fewer female characters to begin with, each one is overburdened with representing women as a group. When an underrepresented group of people, such as women in comics books or at least within the superhero genre, is repeatedly reduced to objects and when a narrative point of view is consistently 'at' that group instead of 'from' that group, the objectified group's power is subverted. This subversion functions to position female superheroes as inferior to their male counterparts and is only exacerbated by the objectification that is occurring alongside.

Positioned as a product of the gaze, conceptions of sexual objectification (LeMoncheck, 1985: Nussbaum, 1995: Langton, 2009) refer to behaviours that degrade women's status to that of an object, therefore, removing their autonomy and agency. While theories of objectification are useful, this thesis finds more utility in theories concerning 'derivatization' as it can be applied more widely, and therefore used to discuss the intersecting facets of this research. Presented as an alternative to the concept of objectification, Cahill (2011) describes the "derivatization" as

to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc. The derivatized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivatizing subject's existence. (2011: 32)

Unlike objectification, derivatization both functions and manifests in a multitude of social and political scenarios many of which are not sexual, for example, when 'fans demand of their heroes not only excellent performance but the fulfilment of certain

moral standards they are requiring those heroes to embody and represent a desired ideal' (ibid., 2011: 33). This can be seen in conceptions of superheroes and their associated portrayals of heroism more broadly, as derivatization informs the genre conventions that dictate them. Sexual derivatization functions similarly and as such is based in part on expectation, which is to say that "the desires, actions, and choices of derivatized women are required to mirror nothing but the desires of men" (Cahill, 2011: 34). Primary amongst these desires is beauty, or more specifically the attainment and perpetuation of the Eurocentric standard of beauty; a standard that prioritizes light skin, straight long hair, thin lips, and a narrow nose (Craig, 2002: 30). A standard, it must be noted, that is "highly racialised, with features and characteristics common to White people (particularly White women), such as lighter skin, designated as the ideal," (Harper and Choma, 2018: 735). This is not to suggest that beauty as a concept is inherently sexist or sexual, but rather is problematic in the ways it is constructed and positioned as a goal specifically for women and represents "an unattainable beauty that does not leave room for cultural and individual differences" (McKay et al, 2018: 1). This holds true within comic books as it does with other forms of popular media, and as comic book writer Greg Rucka has stated,

Comics are a medium that presents women with incredibly prominent sexualised characteristics. Women are often drawn from the back or from the side, large-breasted and small-waisted, long-haired and long-legged, sometimes without their faces shown at all. (Rucka, 2013 as cited in Cocca, 2014: 411)

However, in the case of the derivatized women, it is not enough that they solely look the part, "they must also act in a certain way... speak in a certain way... emote in a certain way... the represented women must function not as things, not as mere bodies, but as particular kinds of subjects. (Cahill, 2011: 36). It is through this negotiated subjectivity that these women are still recognisable as superheroes, that is people "gifted with fantastic abilities" (Fawaz, 2006: 6), who are "pro-social and selfless" (Coogan, 2007).

As mentioned previously, derivatization can be applied far more broadly than theories of objectification and as such they can be applied to men. While they are much less likely to be derivatized than their female counterparts (Cahill, 2011), their position as superheroes provides two axes through which to derivatize - the heroic, and the masculine. When addressing the heroic, it is important to consider that regardless of any changes that may be occurring within the comics landscape the “dominant culture of mainstream superhero comics today is still one in which ‘straight white men ... write and illustrate the majority of titles, and those books tend to star straight white male protagonists” (Sava et al. 2014). This means that despite any gender-neutral descriptors of what defines a superhero, “superheroes were, in essence, about celebrating masculinity” (Chute, 2007: 278). A masculinity constructed in line with western, Eurocentric ideals and ideologies, and evidenced in their representation as “asexualised cyphers of hyper-masculinity, with big muscles and bigger guns” (Rucka, 2013 as cited in Cocca, 2014: 411). The sexualisation of men in these instances is unnecessary, as Cahill (2011) argues, “real men don’t care that they are attractive to women, and they certainly don’t take steps to shape their bodies into forms that are the most appealing to women. Real men simply are attractive to women by virtue of being themselves” (2011: 45).

Masculinity in these terms can be understood through Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) re-framing of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity embodies “the currently most honored way of being a man” (832), and positions other forms of masculinity as inferior. Within this framework, masculinities “can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men” (838). However “the modern superhero’s bulging muscles, incredible powers, moral superiority, and ensured victories position them as symbols of hegemonic masculinity par excellence” (Brown, 2021: 2). The positioning of hegemonic masculinity as something that appears normative while only actually being achievable by very few, if any actual men, allows for the creation of a hierarchy with it at its top. This is made evident by Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) further theorization of masculinities that sit below hegemonic masculinity; complicit masculinities, those that do not meet

the criteria of hegemonic masculinity but continue to support and benefit from it; subordinate masculinities, those which are considered deviant such as effeminate, homosexual or trans-masculinities; and marginalized masculinities, those which are perceived inferior due to the presence of additional socially constructed marginalisation's such as race, class, ethnicity, and disability.

This section has provided an examination of literature as it pertains to gender and superheroes. In surveying the literature it becomes clear that gender is an important signifier within comic books and has been discussed as such. Alongside this I have been able to situate gender as it is represented within comics as aligned with the derivatization (Cahill, 2011) of woman and heroism and hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). To continue building upon understandings of gender as it relates to the themes of this thesis, the next section of this chapter will address research that approaches gender in relation to death.

## 2.5 Death and Gender

Approaches to gender as it is represented in death within the media and popular culture often focus on the female body (Bronfen, 1992) and its eroticization therein (Foltyn, 2008; Foltyn, 2010; May, 2009). Bronfen suggests that this is because visual representations of the feminine death act as aesthetic substitutions that “serve as ciphers for other values” (1992: xi), thus positioning the feminine death as a site of interest for researchers. Femininity as it is expressed within these representations can be situated in the understanding that “for women, a gendered body often means a sexualised body, a body disciplined into a sexually ‘attractive appearance’ and demeanour,” (Jackson and Scott, 2001: 15). Here “the sexualised body,” is also the “passive body” (2001: 15).

The passivity of the sexualised female body is evident in Foltyn's (2010) ‘corpse chic’, which highlights the use of the corpse, usually a woman, and the “performance



of death” within mainstream fashion. Here “supermodels and celebrities pose as cadavers... glamoris[ing] the freshly or decomposing ‘dead’ body, transforming the alluring living body into an alluring ‘dead’ one,” (2010: no pagination). While these performances are often modelled on “amorous death scenes from literature, mythology, and art,” (2010: no pagination), Foltyn notes that it is “the victim of violent crime, rather than the romantic suicide that is the most common in the performance of corpse chic.” In creating a preference for imagery in which the model is shown to have “suffered a heinous ‘death’ at the hands of a murderer, serial killer, sexual sadist, paedophile, animal, or even a demented toy,” (2010: no pagination) Foltyn argues that corpse chic imagery “moves beyond the sensual into more dubious territory” that she identifies as “corpse porn” (2010: no pagination). “Corpse porn,” Foltyn goes on to write,

highlights the simulated dead body’s sexuality in ways that go beyond the erotic; its themes are vulnerability, debasement, decomposition, and the sexuality of the un-mourned corpse, which it transforms in theatrical ways to titillate viewers with a glimpse of sexual fetishes and perverse sexual subcultures. (2010: no pagination)

Further discussions of ‘corpse porn’ make note of the absence of “socially appropriate emotion,” (Foltyn, 2008: 167), highlighting that the women represented here are not portrayed in such a way as to evoke sadness or shock, rather titillation.

Writing on the aesthetics of death and femininity in classic and contemporary art and literature via a psychoanalytic lens, Bronfen (1992) states that “representations of death in art are so pleasing, it seems, because they occur in a realm clearly delineated as not life, or not real, even as they refer to the basic fact of life we know but choose not to acknowledge too overtly” (Bronfen, 1992: x). She notes that, “narrative and visual representations of death, drawing their material from a common cultural image repertoire, can be read as symptoms of our culture,” (Bronfen, 1992: xi). Through her insightful analysis, Bronfen positions representations of the feminine

body in death as representative of conceptions beyond death, and femininity arguing that,

Feminine death serves as a site at which cultural norms can be debated. While western cultural discourses construct the self as masculine, they ascribe to femininity a position of Otherness. As Other, Woman serves to define the self, and the lack of excess that is located in the Other functions as an exteriorisation of the self, in respect of both gender and death. Woman comes to represent the margins of the extremes of the norm - the extremely good, pure, and helpless, or the extremely dangerous, chaotic, and seductive (...) The construction of Woman-as-Other serves rhetorically to dynamise a social order, while her death marks the end of this period of change. Over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured, whether because the sacrifice of the virtuous, innocent women serves a social critique and transformation, or because a sacrifice of a dangerous woman reestablishes an order then was momentarily suspended due to her presence (Bronfen, 1992: 181)

Further explicating on the ability of representations of the dead body to communicate meaning is Hallam (1997). Writing on representations of death and gender in early modern England, Hallam (1997) argues that,

Representations of dying and death were deeply informed by notions of gender and power relations. The ways in which death was imagined and experienced were shaped by socially dominant ideas about the nature, qualities, and conduct of women and men. The gendered content of representations of death and the ways in which textual and visual images of death were deployed within early modern gender politics tended to reinforce dominant notions about women's subordinate status, (1997: 113)

Research concerned with visual representations of the male body in death is rarely if ever approached from a position that centres gender. Rather these bodies are considered representative of a default experience. As such literature infrequently discusses the male or masculine body, instead focussing on a gender-neutral corpse. For example, writing on corpse geographies and the visibility of the corpse in *Munnu: A boy from Kashmir*, Raina (2021) states that “corpses and unmarked graves are sites of identification in the body politic. The corpse has an agency that enables the visualising of necropolitical logic,” (2021:8). Here the gender of the corpse is rendered insignificant in communicating meaning, however this does not negate the fact that this, and all of the corpses discussed are male.

While this section has demonstrated a paucity of literature that speaks directly to the topic of gendered representations of death within popular culture, it has become evident that research concerned with this intersection is preoccupied with the feminine rather than the masculine body. In focussing on the feminine body, research highlights the eroticisation of the corpse and its ability to convey meaning and reinforce cultural norms. The masculine body however is particularly underutilised in visual research with inquiry instead concerned with the narrative value of death (Alaniz, 2014) over the visual quality.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In highlighting and reviewing relevant literature as it pertains to the key debates informing the research questions and aims outlined in Chapter one, this chapter has been able to locate this thesis within the fields of comics studies, sociology, and death studies. By first addressing the utility of the comic book cover within contemporary sociological research it has become clear that although scholars have identified it as a site of both interest and data it remains neglected in favour of research that favours interior art. Similarly, while scholars have noted that superheroes die “more frequently on covers than they do within interior pages” (Cook, 2015: 18), neither the significance of these representations nor their gendered nature

have been addressed. This was followed by an examination of the literature as it concerned the following areas of study: Visuality and the gaze, Narrative and death, Gender and superheroes, and Death and gender.

Investigation into the area of visuality and the gaze emphasised the significance of visuality in creating structures of power and the gendered nature of the morbid gazes. It also highlighted the changing norms with regards to how society views the practices linked to looking at death, both real and representational as in comic books, and the cultural codes these representations may communicate. This has therefore provided a theoretical understanding and made clear the significance of gender in practices of looking that will inform my approach to visual representations moving forward. Through engaging with the topic of narrative and death it has become evident that the construction of narratives is a key factor in the way that people make sense of death both real and fictional. It is this understanding that poses further questions for this thesis to address as the deaths represented on comic book covers are themselves presented without a surrounding narrative. It was found that research concerned with gender and superheroes highlights the importance of gender as a signifier within the genre. Research focused on female superheroes frequently providing historical evidence to support analyses of matters concerning inclusion and representation alongside understandings of sexualisation and objectification. Whereas research focused on male superheroes focuses on how masculinity is embodied and reinforced. While this thesis is positioned in line with concerns regarding representation and the ways in which gender, that is masculinity and femininity, are embodied and reinforced, there is little evidence to suggest that these matters have been approached in regards to representations of death. Research that addresses visual representations of death and gender as it relates to popular culture is somewhat limited and predominantly focused on advertisements and televisual representations. However, it is through this body of literature that links are made between death, gender, and the utility of the gaze in addressing these concerns.

In conclusion, through reviewing the literature it has become evident that there are instances in which the topics addressed within the thesis have been approached in a variety of insightful ways. However, there is little to suggest that a full study of the significance of death within popular culture using comic book covers with a focus on gendered representation has been conducted. For example, there is little to no research wholly concerned with representations of death as they occur on comic book covers. Neither has there been a thorough engagement with the ways in which these representations are gendered. Similarly little attention has been given to the ways in which these gendered representations can reinforce cultural views of power and agency. Therefore, in identifying these gaps within the literature I am able to situate this thesis as both relevant to existing debates within visual sociology, comic book studies, and death studies, and as an original piece of scholarship that responds to the highlighted omissions.

The next chapter will outline and rationalise the methodology used to address the research questions and aims. Successive chapters will compile the analyses from the collected data with chapter four focusing on the role of narrative, while chapters five and six will address superheroes, masculinity and death, and superheroes, femininity and death respectively.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter will explain and rationalise the methodology used within this thesis as it pertains to the research aim of exploring the role of death in comic books and the following research questions:

- What is the significance of death in comic books?
- Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?
- How do the gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?

I provide a reflexive account of how the research was conducted, beginning with an outline of the methodological approach and how I intend to locate myself within my research. Following this, this chapter will outline the research process by detailing the research design, selection and analysis of a secondary data set, data collection methods, and analytic procedures. Subsequently I will account for and reflect upon any ethical considerations that have arisen during these processes.

## 3.1 Methodological Approach

As this thesis sits at an intersection between visual sociology, comics studies, and death studies, it requires a similarly interdisciplinary methodological approach. Informed by intersectional feminist approaches to research, this research will mirror its core aims of promoting an “emancipatory type of inquiry, that not only documents aspects of reality but takes a personal, political and engaging stance to the world”

(Sarantakos, 2005: 54). Building upon this, this research also works to incorporate standpoint theory, (Harding, 2004, Alcoff and Potter, 1993, Code, 1991). Therefore, positioning the researcher within the research through a reflexive approach that “requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how the researcher’s self-location (across for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position, and interests influence all stages of the research process” (Pillow, 2003: 178). This allows for a consideration of my own location and identity; not only as an academic but also as a queer, non-binary, comics fan, and critic, to examine how this would frame my approach to both the research and the subject matter.

In relation to the positioning of the fan-academic, Sholle (1991) argues that there is “a danger of taking up the standpoint of a fan and thus confusing one’s own stance with that of the subject being studied” (Sholle, 1991: 84). Hence, it has become commonplace to “ignore or hide our personal and cultural investments in our academic writing” (Doty, 2010:11) in order to retain both an objective distance from the subject matter and the respect of our peers. However, academic distance has thus allowed scholars to either “judge or to instruct, but not to converse with the fan community, a process which requires greater proximity and the surrender of certain intellectual pretensions and institutional privileges” (Jenkins, 1992: 6). I believe that my experiences as both a fan and as a critic of comic books has uniquely positioned me to address this topic in a way that is critical and nuanced. As Jenkins (1992: 7) notes, many fans are “distrustful of how their culture may look under scholarly scrutiny (...) demonstrating one’s own commitment and participation in that community allows a researcher to gain trust”. Similarly, while representations of gender and gendered representations are key to this study and “binary constructs are inescapable in contemporary Western society and must be attended to in qualitative studies of social phenomena” (Dallacqua and Low, 2021: 70) this thesis aims to both acknowledge and challenge these binary representations (ibid.). However, while I endeavour to make a space within the research that legitimates not only the voices of women, but also those of marginalised or minority genders through participation, this has been limited by the norms inherent in contemporary comic books.

## 3.2 Research Design

Due to its flexibility and fluidity, I chose to pursue qualitative research over quantitative research as it was better “suited to understanding the meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences of individuals” (Liamputtong, 2009: xii). In order to collect data that was both rich and nuanced, I used a predominantly visual, multimethod approach that encompassed the complementary use of: i) an in depth visual analysis of a data set comprised of a series of comic book covers; and ii) the thematic analysis of data collected via photo elicitation within synchronous digital focus groups of comic book fans. Each of these methods, when used together, allowed for the collection of data that was both diverse and rich and assisted in discovering how readers responded to the various images and the ways in which the images reinforced, or indeed challenged cultural views of power and agency.

Initially I had planned to examine more than just the readership of comic books but also the producers of comic books by conducting up to five in-depth, semi structured interviews with comic book industry professionals. While this would have allowed for a third layer of data, I found that as my research progressed it became less concerned with the intentions behind the work as it was with responses to the work, echoing the concerns of Hall, (Proctor, 2004: 59), who prioritised the “way different audiences generate rather than discover meaning”. While a focus on the producers of comic book images may provide a future avenue of enquiry, it was not one that was currently in line with the aims or objectives of this project.

## 3.3 Selecting A Secondary Data Set

Discussion materials for the visual analysis and focus groups would be drawn from the pre-existing data that is comic book art, specifically cover art. Cover art, rather than interior art, has been selected because comics tend to be displayed front facing,



that is to say with the cover facing outwards, in shops and on other digital comics platforms. This allows cover art to be seen, not only by those who plan to read the book, but also by those who may just be browsing the shelves with little to no context of how these covers relate to the content within the pages. Initially I was seeking two distinct data sets, one from each of both Marvel Comics and DC Comics contemporary catalogues. This would have allowed me to create two discrete pieces of analysis using each of the methods - compositional analysis and focus groups - which I could later synthesise to produce a deeper, more nuanced understanding and a richer analysis.

However, before I was able to conduct either the analysis or focus groups, I had to select the data set from which to draw analysis. As I intended to use imagery that already exists from a medium in which there are thousands if not hundreds of thousands of images relevant to my study, it was important to establish clear parameters in which to work, and a rationale by which to select both the initial (to be used in the primary analysis) and the secondary set (to be used during focus groups). Due to the ephemeral nature of monthly comic books, accessibility and availability were key amongst my concerns in identifying a series of images that could be assembled into a suitable data set.

I began by narrowing my choice first by publisher, and eliminating smaller and independent presses and publishers allowed me to direct my focus toward the “big two” - Marvel Comics and DC Comics. Marvel and DC operate similarly in terms of content, and fandom with many of their stories and characters being analogous, some incidentally such as Marvel Comics’ *Man Thing* (Lee and Thomas, et al, 1971) and DC Comics’ *Swamp Thing* (Wein and Wrightson, 1971) but many by design, for example Marvel Comics’ *Hyperion* (Thomas and Buscema, 1969) was designed as a pastiche of DC Comics’ *Superman* (Siegel and Schuster, 1938). Both publishers also currently boast global readerships (Alverson, 2022), television and movie franchises (Marvel Entertainment, 2022), and a number of entertainment licences that range from toys to homewares (Block, 2014). This global reach exemplifies comic books, and in particular the superhero genre’s cultural relevance.

I began my search using Marvel Unlimited, a digital library application through which subscribers can access comics from Marvel Comics history. From the titles available I gravitated toward X-men, a long running, multi-titled series in which death is frequent, yet rarely permanent, as themes regarding both death and resurrection play heavily within their ongoing narratives. While my initial inclination was to focus on the deaths of specific characters, my research into these led me toward the *'Death of X'* series, which ran during 2016. As part of the surrounding marketing campaign, Marvel commissioned and published 20 'variant', or alternative, covers that featured art of the X-men dead or dying in a variety of ways. The *Death of X* covers provided me with a data set of 20, contemporary and thematically relevant images that I could discuss without the associated bias that could be assigned to me had I curated a unique selection of images.

Furthermore, as the data set was a series of variant covers, it was unlikely that the art would directly reflect the contents of the comics books on which they are found. This meant that even if the participants were familiar with the titles to which these covers were attached this knowledge would not inform their readings of the images. This disparity between cover and contents is not uncommon across comics books. Rather comic book covers serve a number of interpretational contributions which can typically be classified as belonging to one or more of eight taxonomic categories (Cook, 2015). Of these categories the covers within the data set predominantly meet the criteria for the 'titling cover', that is those that serve to communicate "the relevant series within which the issue inquisition should be located" (ibid, 2015: 20) and the 'non-sequitur cover' or a cover where "the art neither corroborates nor conflicts with the content of tone of the interior pages, but instead seems completely orthogonal to the narrative contained in the work," (ibid, 2015: 21). A further category of cover found within the data set is the 'allusive cover'. These are covers which make reference to other works and are often found "in the form of homage covers that pay tribute to, or parody, historically or artistically important comic covers" (ibid, 2015: 21). This style of cover is evidenced most prominently on the cover featuring Storm

(See chapter six, fig. 7) which is a pastiche of a conflict that took place much earlier within the X-Men timeline.

While DC does have a similar digital library application, it is not currently accessible from outside of the United States of America and it does not host as wide a body of content therefore I have been unable to utilise it. This made my search more difficult, however, I was led toward a second data set when a pre-released cover image created some controversy due to its highly sexualised depiction of a dead woman (Yehl, 2019). Further investigation into the series found that, again, death was a major theme within the story and was represented vividly in both the art and the narrative. Set to run across nine issues during 2018 - 19, *Heroes in Crisis* was a limited crossover series featuring heroes from DC Comics' entire roster. Unlike *Death of X*, *Heroes in Crisis* had not committed to using imagery of death or the dying on every cover. Therefore, if I were to use the imagery from this book, I would need to use both cover and interior art. While I believe that interior art is as worthy of academic enquiry as cover art, this is not the focus of this thesis. Unlike cover art, interior art requires further commitment and engagement from the audience. By enforcing the distinction between cover and interior art, I am able to create clear boundaries between what I am and am not researching. It would have been very easy to only select 'famous' or 'classic' examples of deaths or deaths' that support my thesis by selecting images that showcase particularly gruesome, or unpleasant deaths. By opting for this method, I have removed the potential for accusations of bias or an attempt to lead the research unfairly through my decisions. Further research into the DC Comics back catalogue was unsuccessful as I was unable to access their digital library application and as such, I was unable to locate an appropriate equivalent to the *Death of X* data set.

In failing to locate a second data set I was compelled to consider not only alternatives, but also its necessity in meeting the aims of the research. While I had initially planned to use two discrete data sets - one as a means to engage with fans via photo-elicitation and focus groups, and the second to produce a visual analysis -

it became apparent that using a single data set could prove equally beneficial. In utilising a single data set from which to produce both a visual analysis and to generate participant data I would be able to create a richer and more nuanced array of data as it pertains to the data set. Thus, creating a deeper pool from which to draw analyses.

### 3.4 Data Set Analysis - Compositional Interpretation

Following selection of the Death of X covers, I began to investigate ways in which to engage with them that would allow for the extraction of data that would assist in answering my research questions. As I was utilising what Cohn (2016) describes as a 'bottom up' theory or a theory that is "observation driven and motivated by the noticing of a particular trait or trend" (Cohn, 2016: 4), I investigated methods used within disciplines such as visual sociology and art history. As I would be initially working with pre-existing images rather than images that were specifically created for the purpose of analysis, I looked toward a number of unobtrusive methods. Unobtrusive methods are those that do not involve the direct elicitation of information from research participants (Lee, 2000: 1). They instead allow researchers to 'learn about social life by looking at the things we produce' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011: pp. 286), such as literature, television, and websites.

Rose (2016) lays out three criteria for a successful visual methodology, which ask that researchers: "i) take images seriously; ii) think about the social conditions and effects of images and their modes of distribution, and; iii) consider one's own way of looking at images" (2016: 32). That is to say, for a rigorous analytic approach to visual culture to exist there must be conviction that images and the construction of visuality is of academic importance. It was through the consideration of my own way of looking at images that I began to assess the potential for beginning the process with a "compositional interpretation" (Rose, 2012) of each image. Coined by Rose (2012), compositional interpretation describes an "approach to imagery that has developed through certain kinds of art history" (2012: 51). More descriptive than

analytical, compositional interpretation can be used to address the key components of the image such as its content, colour, spatial organisation, light, and expressive content (Rose, 2016) in an objective manner. Due to its descriptive nature, compositional interpretation requires that the researcher clearly and concisely identifies and explains the individual elements of an image. This allows for the production of a textual basis from which to draw a deep analysis of these individual elements such as the positioning of the body and the gaze, the state of dress, visible distress, perspective and colour choices; of *what* we can see and *how* we understand it. It is for this reason that compositional interpretation can be used to reframe the ways a person is “able, allowed, or made to see” (Rose, 2016: 3). For example, “small differences in the structural composition can provide an indication of shifts in the social valuation of particular groups and how images are assembled often gives insights into how activities, events, and roles are socially constructed” (Lee, 2000: 112). It is here that approaches to the gaze (hooks, 2010; Mulvey, 2009; Pierson, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011) can be applied to further support my analysis, specifically those relating to morbidity and necrophilia (Pierson, 2010; Penfold-Mounce, 2015; Foltyn, 2008; May, 2009). Theories of the gaze assert that particular visualities are central to how subjectivities are formed (Rose, 2016) and as such are concerned not only with the image but also the act of looking, and pleasure found in looking and allow researchers to simultaneously explore the mutual constitution of the psychic and social, and the image and spectator (Rose, 2016).

To build upon the compositional interpretations, I drew on Goffman’s (1979) framework for categorising active and passive modes of body language and appearance. The categories as they appear within Goffman’s (1979) framework, account for:

- (i) Relative Size (ibid: 28), which uses height to represent authority. For example, men here are taller than women, and women are taller than lower ranking men such as waiters.

(ii) The Feminine Touch (ibid: 29), which positions a woman's touch as delicate, and caressing compared to a man's more functional or utilitarian touch.

(iii) Function Ranking (ibid: 32), which places men in higher ranking positions than women with regards to their occupations, for example doctors and nurses.

(iv) The Family (ibid: 37), this foregrounds the heteronormative, nuclear family structure and highlights mother/daughter and father/son bonds.

(v) The Ritualisation of Subordination (ibid: 40), which emphasises deference to an authority through physical lowering, canting postures, and recumbent positions.

(vi) Licensed Withdrawal (ibid: 57), which shows women engaging in activities that function to remove them psychologically from the scene, for example talking on the phone. Alternatively, this is characterised by partially hiding behind a man, turning away, or covering the face.

These categories provided a useful starting point when considering similar features within my own data set as they function to describe “unrealistic, hyper-ritualised behaviours that reflect gender inequalities and facilitate fast comprehension” (Butkowski and Tajima, 2017: 1040). While it has been noted that since the development of Goffman’s framework “feminism has developed significantly in associating stereotypical gender display with nuanced layers of meaning” (Butkowski and Tajima, 2017: 1040), it still presents a useful analytic tool.



*Figure 1: A method of compositional interpretation applied to Uncanny Inhumans #12  
Variant by Harvey Tolibao.*

A compositional interpretation was applied to each of the twenty images in the data set and was conducted in the following manner: First a detailed account of the image was produced, taking into consideration aspects of content, colour, spatial organisation, light, and expressive content (Rose, 2016). For example, Figure 1, the image shows, in the central foreground, the figure of a woman in profile, facing the viewer's left. She is kneeling halfway between a vertical and a sitting kneel and engulfed by a flaming energy that in some places appears to be emanating directly from her body. Her head is thrown back, her mouth is open, and her hands are clawed. This data was then considered in line with Goffman's framework (1979), for example kneeling is, as Goffman (1979) coined, indicative of the 'ritualisation of subordination' (1979: 40). This suggests that the character is passive in the moment, accepting of her fate. In directing the character's gaze away from the viewer, she is subject to 'licensed withdrawal' (1979: 57). This means that she does not challenge the viewer through eye contact and therefore we are free to gaze upon her. This also puts her in opposition to the character, a somewhat abstracted bird's face, occupying the upper background, who, unlike the female figure, has its gaze directed toward the viewer. When considered alongside the fact that the bird is both larger in size and higher up the page, we can again refer to Goffman's (1979) framework and its

categories of 'relative size' (1979: 28) and 'function ranking' (1979: 32) indicate that while the female figure is the subject of the image she is not necessarily the most important part of it.

I also drew on approaches to the Gaze (hooks, 2010; Mulvey, 2009; Pierson, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011) to support my analysis, specifically those relating to morbidity and necrophilia (Pierson, 2010; Penfold-Mounce, 2015; Foltyn, 2008; May, 2009). Theories of the gaze assert that particular visualities are central to how subjectivities are formed (Rose, 2016) and as such are concerned not only with the image but also the act of looking, and pleasure found in looking and allow researchers to simultaneously explore the mutual constitution of the psychic and social, and the image and spectator (Rose, 2016).

While detailed in its understanding and descriptions of the elements of the image, compositional interpretation fails to encourage discussion of how its analysis might be used, understood, or interpreted by a viewer (Rose, 2016). For example, in viewing the same image, a dedicated fan of *X-Men* comics may describe the image as featuring the *X-Men*'s Jean Grey in her original 1960's Marvel girl costume being engulfed by the Phoenix Force. They might note that while Jean had previously lost her life to the Phoenix Force, it was not during the era in which this costume was featured, thus arguing that this could be seen as a more metaphorical death in which the 'Marvel Girl' aspect of Jean Grey's characters are subsumed and replaced by that of Phoenix. This demonstrates that while the elements of the image remain the same, the viewer may not initially consider them as individual compositional components of a whole but rather as an image from a media property that they are familiar with and from which they are able to draw meaning. The visual elements that point toward the submissive nature of the character may not appear clear until prompted, and there is no guarantee that the viewer would agree with this reading. This issue may also arise when participants are presented with "allusive covers" (Cook, 2015: 21) such as the cover featuring Storm (See chapter six, fig. 7). This cover makes reference to a previous conflict of which dedicated X-Men fans may be aware. However, by changing the outcome of the event it may spur further



conversation on the nature of death particularly as it relates to female characters. However, we cannot assume that every viewer will have a detailed enough knowledge of *X-Men* lore to be able to make these links. For example, as the image featuring Jean Grey was not used as a cover for an *X-Men* comic but rather as a variant cover for an issue of *Uncanny Inhumans* and the cover featuring Storm (see fig. 7) was used as the cover for an issue of *Black Panther* the implicit knowledge cannot be assumed and as such we are left in a position to infer meaning from what we can see, and how we are able to understand it. These divergent readings or interpretations align with the hypothetical positions proposed by Hall (1996) to explain the multitudinous ways that an audience may interpret a media text (See chapter two). Further examination of these readings would be considered following the next step of data collections when participants were asked to respond to imagery selected from the secondary data set during the focus group interviews.

### 3.5 Data Collection - Online Focus Groups and Photo Elicitation

While the compositional interpretation provided a point of descriptive analysis its function within the later analytic chapters is supplemental. Therefore, in order to address my research questions it was necessary to begin gathering primary data as it pertained to the data set. Primary data, as outlined in a subsequent section, will provide the basis for a reflexive thematic analysis. I considered a number of qualitative methods of data collection, such as one-to-one interviews and open-ended questionnaires, which would have permitted me to gather in-depth data directly from individual participants. However, I decided that using photo elicitation within synchronous digital focus groups would be appropriate, given both the subject matter and the online nature of the community I was looking to research.

The comics community currently represents a “captive online population” (Stewart and Williams, 2005: 398) and as such online spaces facilitate the breadth of “comic book culture” (Resha, 2019: 80). Similarly, as comic book stores struggle to stay afloat in the current economic climate (Barnett, 2019), online retailers are becoming

an increasingly popular method of consumption. This shift to digital is exemplified in Resha's (2019) work on the 'Blue Age' of comics, which posits a shift toward online spaces and is defined as the digitization of comic books and comic book culture, digital readers, guided reading technology, and social media (Resha, 2019). Utilising online focus groups, therefore, allowed me to capitalise on this zeitgeist.

Focus groups represent a flexible research tool in that they can be adapted to obtain information about almost any topic in a wide array of settings and from very different types of individuals and have been used to give voice to marginalised groups such as minority ethnic groups and women (Liamputtong, 2009: 67). By employing the use of online focus groups I am able to bring together members of an otherwise "geographically dispersed" (Stewart and Williams, 2005: 397) community, in a safe space that does not require they leave their home or office and offers an online environment that can provide a manner of anonymity and "social equalisation as individual socioeconomic status, and other potential issues of contention may be unknown to other participants and can therefore serve as an egalitarian method of data collection" (Oringderff, 2004: 70).

Unlike in-depth interviews, focus groups also allow for interaction between participants. As the composition of the group plays a major role in the interaction process (Liamputtong, 2009), I ensured that focus groups were made up of acquaintances. Focus groups conducted with acquaintances not only allow the participants to share their experiences but also to disclose personal information (Liamputtong, 2009). Because of this self-disclosure, the participants are able to examine their own views and the views of others in the group more intensely. This enhances the richness of the information gathered (Liamputtong, 2009). Similar findings can be seen when the members of each group come from similar social and cultural backgrounds, as again they may feel more comfortable talking to each other and also more likely to talk openly (Barbour, 2007). Interaction, therefore, is based upon the comfort and perceived safety of a participant in a given situation to speak openly and as the more the participants interact, the deeper the level of disclosure can be obtained, the more important it is to ensure this comfort. As Liamputtong

(2009: 65) writes, it is “this interaction that assists people in exploring and clarifying their points of view”. This opportunity to clarify is important as I encouraged participants to engage with topics that they might have previously not given much thought to or at least not explored in depth. Similarly, Kline et al (1992: 448) argued that the informality of the group setting is designed to encourage “a degree of candidness and spontaneity among participants that is not so readily captured in a more structured one on one interview situation”.

Additionally, as a number of sensitive topics, for example those that concern death, violence, and sexual conduct (Liamputtong, 2011), were likely to be raised during the focus group discussions, consideration was made for how to both address and mitigate the risks associated with engaging with such topics. Risks in these circumstances can range from certain disclosures resulting in participants being put in danger of “stigma or intolerance by others,” (Liamputtong, 2011: 108) to “psychological harm or emotional distress” (Corbin and Morse, 2003: 336). One means of mitigating the likelihood of participants being subject to stigma or intolerance at the hands of their cohort was to ensure I was cultivating an “environment where they can articulate their experiences, opinions and beliefs in the company of people who share similar experiences and hold similar beliefs” (Liamputtong, 2011: 110). A means of establishing this was to ensure that focus groups were composed of people with positive preexisting relationships. These relationships provided the safety and support to discuss things beyond one's usual comfort zone. The sense of safety established through familiarity also allowed for participants to set clear boundaries with the discussion both with regards to how much they were comfortable with sharing but with regards to probing questions and the directions that other participants may try to steer the conversation. This factor was further aided by the interpersonal knowledge many of the participants had of each other as this in itself served to make each other aware of potential triggers and traumas without these having to be addressed more formally.

A further means of mitigating emotional distress was to send the images due to be discussed to participants shortly in advance of the focus group. This allowed the

participants the opportunity to not only familiarise themselves with the images to some extent but to decide whether or not its contents and the accompanying conversation was something they would be comfortable with. This also allowed for participants to withdraw prior to the beginning focus group rather than during the discussion if that was something they felt would be necessary to protect their mental health.

In order to recruit participants, a snowball method was utilised. The snowball sampling method provides a technique for helping to ensure this and while it can be seen as biased because it is not random and it selects individuals on the "basis of social networks", (Browne, 2005: 51), I would assert that due to the marginalised nature of the population I am looking to research, it is unlikely they would have volunteered their perspective in front of strangers. Therefore, participants were recruited using my own networks that are based on a shared interest in comic books to reach out to people both within and outside of the comics community. This would allow for the inclusion of participants from a range of backgrounds, such as writers, academics, and both casual and dedicated fans in addition to people of various nationalities, ethnicities, ages, sexualities and genders. Participants were contacted through social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Slack and were encouraged to refer further participants from their own networks. All potential participants were provided with a research information sheet (see appendix one) that provided an outline of aims and objectives of the research, their role as participants, and how the information collected will be used.

In line with these requirements the final focus groups were composed of participants with pre-existing relationships which ranged in closeness and depth. For example, one group was comprised of a friendship group that included a romantic relationship, another featured family members, while a further group was made up of work acquaintances. As a determining factor in this research and by extension its recruitment was a desire to highlight and legitimise the voices of women and those of marginalised or minority genders participants were recruited accordingly. As such, the final demographic composition of the focus groups was 55% cisgender women and 45% transgender people. I use transgender here in its broadest capacity to refer

to a range of transgender identities including both transgender men and women, and non-binary individuals.

Online focus groups further benefit from flexibility with regards to their temporality as they can be conducted either in real time (synchronous) or not (asynchronous) (Stewart and Williams, 2005). I elected to conduct synchronous online focus groups due to their similarity to traditional face-to-face focus groups, which allow for real time interaction between the moderator and the participants but use chat rooms or other software packages (Oringderff, 2004). For the purpose of my focus groups, I used shared Google Documents as they are free, can be used by multiple users simultaneously, and are easily accessible to anyone with access to a computer or smartphone. To access the document participants were sent a link one hour prior to the start time. This gave those who were unfamiliar with Google Documents time to familiarise themselves with the application and allowed for any troubleshooting to occur outside of the focus groups assigned time slot.

Photo elicitation could be considered as similarly community specific due to its inherently visual nature. “Based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002: 13) photo elicitation creates a space for understanding “the experiences (including emotions, feelings, and ideas) of the participants” (Bates et al, 2017:461). Unlike other forms of interview, Harper (2002: 13) argues that photo elicitation “evokes a different kind of information”. It is due to this reason that it is particularly useful when discussing sensitive topics as it often provokes a more emotional response from participants and prompts discussion of topics otherwise difficult to reach (Rose, 2016). Harper (2002: 21-2) suggests that this is because “photo elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews”. Images open people up and help to elicit different kinds of knowledge than talking alone as they evoke the effective materiality of social life (Rose, 2016) that brings a richness to the data. For example, “the relations and forms depicted in images can become the basis for a discussion of broader abstractions and generalities; vague memories can be given sharpness and focus,” (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015: 86).

While typical focus groups in research involve six to ten participants (Liamputtong, 2009: 65), it was always my intention for the focus groups in my study to be much smaller. Ideally, they would have between two and four participants as this would allow for each member the time and space to contribute to the discussion without feeling overwhelmed by either the group or the conversation as the “dynamics of synchronous online chat can be fast, furious, and chaotic” (Fox et al, 2012: 542). While there is little consensus regarding the ideal size of an online focus group, Lobe (2017) suggests that three to four participants is most effective. Those who advocate for larger group sizes (Stewart and Williams, 2005) do so to mitigate potential drop out rates. Braun and Clarke (2013) support the notion that smaller focus groups work better and place the ideal number of participants at between three and eight. Larger groups are also more likely to develop “group talk” in which participants who do not agree with the majority opinion may remain silent rather than face the group from an outsider position (Hennink, 2014). I aimed to conduct up to ten focus groups as I believed this would provide me with a range of data; however, I also intended to cease data collection once I reached saturation (Lowe et al, 2018). Following the initial data gathering period, I found that I was in need of further data as the focus of my thesis shifted to include an analysis of masculinity in parallel to femininity. This data was collected at a later date but was in line with the methodology outlined in this chapter. Thus, I ran eight focus groups in total, each with three participants. The first tranche of focus groups took place during July 2020 and the eighth in June, 2022.

Each focus group was presented with two of the twenty images for discussion as this allowed for a point of comparative discussion. The images were selected and assigned using a random number generator and while this led, in some cases, to duplication it also removed potential bias as the selection process was random. Alongside this, the conversation was led using a semi-structured interview schedule (see appendix three). The schedule was separated into four distinct areas, the first introduced the participants to the broader context of the research and the imagery in order to ascertain their starting position on the subject and how they would define a

'good' and a 'bad' death. Sections two and three prompted in-depth discussions of the imagery, and section four allowed for comparison and reflection on their previous responses. Participants were informed that focus groups discussions would not exceed 1.5 hours, including introductory information and debriefing. This was to ensure that participants were able to commit to the duration of the session, while also being mindful of the fact that participants would be giving their time and thoughts without compensation, so I did not wish to unfairly monopolise their time or energy. However, some groups did run longer due to the enthusiasm of the participants and the depth of the conversations that occurred.

### 3.6 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

While several procedures for the analysis of qualitative data exist, for example, content analysis, discourse analysis and narrative analysis, I have elected to utilise a reflexive thematic approach within this thesis. Described as “a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data” (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297), reflexive thematic analysis provides as “accessible form of analysis, particularly for those early in a qualitative research career” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81). This accessibility is exemplified through its flexibility, which is described as “not simply theoretical” but also applies to the “research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to meaning generation” (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297). Rather than being tied to “any particular theoretical, epistemological, or ontological frameworks” (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 178) reflexive thematic analysis centres “the researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process” (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594).

The means for this engagement is accounted for in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six phase guide. The first of the phases requires that a researcher familiarise themselves with the data. This required that I read and re-read the transcripts from each of my focus group interviews making notes of “early impressions” (Maguire and

Delahunt, 2017: 3355) that could provide the basis for the initial codes. Codes here refer to “the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data relevant to the research question” (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297) and can be classified as either semantic or latent. Semantic codes are predominantly description and are “identified through the explicit or surface meanings of the data” (Byrne, 2022: 1397). Latent codes however, can be used to “identify hidden meanings or underlying assumptions, ideas, or ideologies that may shape or inform the descriptive or semantic content of the data” (Byrne, 2022: 1397). This research does not seek to prioritise one form over code over another, rather, semantic codes were produced when meaningful semantic information was interpreted, and latent codes were produced when meaningful latent information was interpreted (Byrne, 2022: 1397). The generation of these initial codes was conducted as the second step of this process in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guide. In order to generate these codes, I again worked through the data, one question at a time, identifying “interesting aspects in the data items that may form the basis of repeated patterns” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 89). This was done manually, using highlighters to “indicate potential patterns” (2006: 89). While this was conducted with the research questions in mind I was also open to identifying codes that were otherwise unexpected. It was due to keeping an open mind that I was able to identify the key theme later defined as ‘the role of narrative’. Following this stage of the research I examined the codes for the emergence of themes, patterns within the codes that would provide the basis for analysis. Themes are “categorised by their significance” (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017: 3356) and “provide a framework for organising and reporting the researcher’s analytical observations” (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297). Examples of themes that emerged as a result of this stage are ‘role of narrative’, and ‘representations of death’. During stage four, themes are reviewed to ensure that they are “coherent and distinct from each other” (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017: 3356). Refinement at this stage required the researcher to revisit both the initial codes and the emergent themes to make certain that they were in fact supported by data. These themes were further refined during stage five of the process. Here themes are defined and sub-themes are identified. It was during this stage of the analysis that the sub-themes of ‘emotion’, and ‘consequences’ were identified and defined within the broader theme of ‘role of narrative’.



While the final stage of this process requires writing up, I paused to instead repeat the initial five steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) with the analytical data compiled during the compositional analysis of the secondary data set. This allowed me to identify the presence of any similar or indeed contradictory themes as they occurred between the compositional analysis and the participant data with regards to the secondary data set. In identifying these themes, I was then able to better utilise the compositional interpretation in support of participant data during stage six of the analytic process, writing up. Evidence of the writing up stage can be found in subsequent chapters of these thesis (see chapters four, five, and six).

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

There are a number of ethical considerations (British Sociological Association, 2017) that need to be taken into account during any research project but particularly those that involve materials that have the potential to be triggering. For example, this research included images and discussion of the gendered nature of death and violence, both of which have the potential to be triggering or upsetting, especially to those not familiar with the narrative and artistic styles and tropes surrounding these topics in contemporary comics. Therefore, it was important to consider the impacts this may have on participants.

I did not knowingly include any vulnerable participants; this includes participants who were under 18 years of age and those lacking the capacity to consent. All participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the study prior to their involvement. Participants were also given the opportunity to view samples of the imagery prior to their involvement. All participants were given anonymity and are referred to in the text using a pseudonym. While demographic data was collected, it was not used in such a way that could lead to the identification of any of the participants. Any personal information a participant chose to share was made anonymous and will not be shared with third parties. There was no cause for

participants to disclose financial or sensitive organisational data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study prior to their involvement with the focus group and provided with contact details for the researcher, their supervisors, and a number of support lines appropriate to their geographical location, such as Nightline, The Samaritans, IDAS, Cruse Bereavement, and Victim Support.

All participants were approached with an information sheet and consent form and were given the chance to ask any questions regarding the research prior to their involvement. It was made clear that any data they provide would be treated in accordance with GDPR and that they will not be identified in any reports or future publications. Focus group participants were only able to withdraw from the study prior to having participated in the focus group. Once the focus group began participants were free to withdraw, but contributions would remain on record due to the nature of group discussions. Any responses would, however, be anonymised and should they be used in the final submission or any future research activities, the researcher would not use any identifying features. Participants were reminded of this prior to the beginning of the focus group to allow them a final opportunity to withdraw. With regards to storage and data management, digital files were stored on a personal computer that is encrypted with BitLocker and password protected. Following the transfer to secure storage, all raw data, for example transcripts, will be anonymised using the guidance provided by UK Data Archive which includes the removal of direct identifiers, and the aggregation of identifiable variables.

I did not anticipate that there would be any physical risks to the participants as the research took place online, however, should any distress be encountered participants were advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and were provided with the contact details for a number of support lines such as Nightline, The Samaritans, IDAS, Cruse Bereavement, and Victim Support. As the research took place online the risk of physical harm or threats to the researcher's safety were minimal. Similarly, I did not anticipate that I, as the researcher, would be subject to any emotional distress. However, should any have arisen, I had access to the same list of support contacts as the participants, in addition to my supervisory

team. While the topics discussed did not lead to any accusations of harm or impropriety, had they arisen they would have been treated seriously, and reported to the supervisory team who would have decided how these matters should be managed.

At writing there were no conflicts of interest arising as a result of this research, should any become apparent they will be discussed with the supervisory team who will advise on how they should be addressed. Similarly, there are no financial conflicts of interest, perceived or actual, as neither the university nor the researcher are receiving or are due to receive funds from any of the communities or individuals likely to take part in the research.

### 3.8 Conclusion

In summary this chapter sets out the methodological approach and research design central to this thesis. It goes on to outline the methods implemented in selecting and analysing a data set via compositional interpretation; the procedures required to conduct synchronous online focus groups and photo elicitation, including sampling, and the accompanying reflexive thematic analysis. Finally, this chapter addressed the ethical considerations relevant to this research. In keeping with the approach outlined above, I proceeded with the research in a manner that both utilised and builds upon my own knowledge, strengths, and experiences. Allowing for fluidity and flexibility as I both collected and analysed data from a number of sources, I worked to discover how readers respond to the visual representation of death and the ways in which the images support or challenge cultural views of power and agency. Successive chapters will compile the analyses from the collected data with chapter four focusing on the role of narrative, while chapters five and six will address superheroes, masculinity, and death, and superheroes, femininity, and death respectively.

# Chapter Four: Narrative and Death

In reference to the first research question posed by this thesis – What is the significance of death in comic books? - this chapter serves to highlight the roles of death, narrative, and gender in communicating the significance of death and its role within contemporary comic books. As such, this chapter argues that participants understand the role of death in contemporary comic books, and popular culture more broadly, as being tied to narrative with death functioning as a device through which to move a plot forward via various means. Additionally, this chapter argues that the deaths that occur specifically as a narrative device disproportionately feature women and marginalised people, therefore positioning these deaths as lacking narrative importance and centrality and representing women in death as disposable or objectified. Men's deaths, however, are more likely to be considered to be both heroic and central to the narrative. Furthermore, this chapter argues for the creation of new typologies that extend beyond conventional understandings of 'good' and 'bad' deaths to be utilised that take into consideration superheroic motivation, and narrative impact when discussing the deaths of superheroes as they occur within comic books. These findings will be demonstrated across three sections that utilise and engage with themes drawn directly from participant data collected in line with the methods laid out in the previous chapter (see chapter three).

The first section, *The Role of Narrative*, will explicate the themes: 'provision of consequences' and 'audience responses'. This section will engage with participants' conceptions of why death is so prevalent within contemporary comic books and, in particular, the superhero genre. The next section, *Representations of Death*, will address the themes relating to gendered differences and engage with participants' attitudes towards representations of death, with reference to memorable examples of

death chosen by participants. This will be followed by *Idealised Deaths*, this section will focus on the themes: 'narrative ideal' and 'personal ideal'. Here typologies of death that have emerged from the data will be considered alongside academic understandings of 'good' and 'bad' deaths to better conceive of what it means to die a superheroic death. Prior to addressing these themes, this chapter will begin with a brief overview of literature as it pertains to the themes discussed within in order to better situate the reader.

## 4.1 The Role of Narrative

Narrative, as outlined within the Literature Review (see chapter two), can be defined as "somebody telling someone else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something" (Herman et al., 2012: 3). It refers broadly to the act of storytelling and can be categorised as fiction or nonfiction. Narratives can provide structure for "that which we experience, creating order in disorder and establishing meaning in what can seem a meaningless situation" (Gilbert, 2010: 224), creating frameworks for understanding and grounding the experiences of audiences. Similarly, within fiction, narratives provide "opportunities to experience dangerous adventure, complex problems, difficult challenges (...) and anything else imaginable" (Kottler, 2015: 165). They create space for audiences to safely contend with actions, occurrences, and consequences beyond the scope of their lived experience. This of course extends to death. Narrative constructions of death differ somewhat from constructions of other events because death, as it occurs within real life, has become an increasingly private matter (Kellerhear, 2007). That is, one that takes place away from the public view, and often confined to hospital or hospice settings. Accordingly, many of the narratives regarding death found within popular culture are themselves informed by similarly fictionalised mediated accounts. However, this does not prevent these narrative representations of death being utilised to "help bereaved people make sense of loss" (Stelzer et al, 2019: 6), neither does it hinder their provision as "safe and acceptable way to explore death and the dead" (Penfold Mounce, 2016: 20).

However, participant data suggests that death, as it exists within superhero narratives, does not exist to provide a safe way to engage with the dead. Rather, it functions to support the forward motion of the story it is embedded within. This is not to say that these deaths do not have the ability to create an emotional impact, but rather, in these cases, that narrative propulsion is more important than the mediated experience of death itself. Death here is a tool that serves the story rather than its audience. As such, two key themes and four sub themes have been identified as emerging from the data as it describes the role of narrative in relation to death, all of which will be addressed in subsequent subsections. The first of these key themes is the 'provision of consequences'. This theme expresses the importance that result or effect of a death or potential death can have on a narrative. Within this theme sit the sub themes referred to as 'raising of stakes' and 'motivating forces'. Here raising the stakes - a term often used directly by participants - calls attention to what participants feel are generic attempts by narratives to increase tension. Motivating forces, however, refers to a situation in which a death is used specifically to motivate a character toward taking a certain action. The act of 'fridging', which will be discussed in section 4.2.1 under the theme women as disposable, is an example of death as a motivating factor. The second of these key themes to be discussed in this section is audience response. Audience response will also be addressed in reference to two sub themes: 'internal emotion', and 'external drama'. Here internal emotion refers to instances in which participants have identified the use of death to elicit emotional responses, both positive and negative. External drama, on the other hand, refers to instances in which participants have identified the use of death as being used to generate excitement, and sits parallel to the 'raising the stakes' sub theme. Here, drama or dramatic are terms used directly by participants to describe their understanding.

#### 4.1.1 The Role of Narrative - The Provision of Consequences

Addressing first the theme 'provision of consequences' and its initial subtheme, 'raising the stakes', this subsection will address participant data as it argues for the prevalence of death within superhero comics as a means to creating 'stakes'. Stakes

here refers to an outcome that is characterised by risk. In this case both the outcome and the risk are death, sometimes that of the hero and sometimes of supporting characters. Direct reference or allusion to 'stakes' being the reason for the prevalence of death within contemporary comic books was made by seven participants, with three participants linking it directly to their understanding of the impermanence of death within contemporary comic books. The link between the raising of stakes and the impermanence of death was highlighted in the first instance by Rose. Speaking in reference to the prevalence of death in contemporary comic books, Rose states,

I think it's an outgrowth of the need to have stakes. Every creator wants their story to be SERIOUS and have CONSEQUENCES, and death is the ultimate consequence. Except, of course, in a shared persistent universe, you need those characters back. So they die, and then they get better, and then they die again. (Rose: *capital's participants own*)

Rose positions the use of death as directly related to the creators' need to create a narrative consequence that will be taken seriously by audiences. Audiences who are simultaneously aware that the death-as-consequence that they are encountering within these scenarios is likely to be rendered meaningless due to its lack of finality and its potential to reoccur. That is to say that rather than being characterised by "coherence, closure, purpose, and some evaluative consequence" (Popova, 2015: 1) these deaths simply "show us how things end" (Hakola and Kivistö, 2014: xi). It is this lack of meaning and its relationship to frequency that also leads to the banality of these deaths that is indicated in Rose's response. This is echoed by Hakola and Kivistö's (2014) suggestion that "the ubiquity of violent death has sometimes been considered to have led to the banality of death" (2014: xv).

Casey also highlights the cyclical nature of comic books as the impetus for the inclusion of death, stating that "because of the ongoing and cyclical nature of

monthly comics, there is often a perceived need to raise the stakes” (Casey). This was supported in conversation by Jane who said,

I agree with [Casey] here - the need to continuously raise the stakes brings death into the narrative, because in real life that’s the highest stake you have, right? Nothing is more final, even if that’s not actually the case in comics.  
(Jane)

These responses suggest that the need to raise the stakes in these instances is treated as the creator's need but one that is not necessarily shared by the audience. Especially not an audience who are aware that the deaths that they encounter in comics are in fact not necessarily final. Rather deaths in these instances function not unlike those explored in Parker's (2017) discussion of the permadeath mechanic found within roguelike video games. Parker argues that rather than representing the finality of death, “each time a player dies, they’re given the opportunity to be reborn into a whole new world,” (2017: 127). The same can be argued for the comic book character whose death is considered to be similarly temporary. This therefore alleviates the requirement for grief and instead positions death as an obstacle rather than an impasse.

However, this sentiment was not shared by all participants for example, participant Louise who linked the raising of stakes to the finality of death, stating that “deaths are an easy go-to to create stakes, because again, nothing is more final for a character, even if she’s a girlfriend you’ve known for five pages,” (Louise). Louise here is making reference to the character Alexandra DeWitt, the girlfriend of Kyle Raynor, alias Green Lantern, and best known for being murdered and stuffed into a refrigerator in *Green Lantern* #54 (Marz et al, 1994) thus becoming instrumental in generating both the trope and the terms “women in refrigerators” (Simone, 1999), and the more colloquial ‘fridging’. Dewitt represents one of the few instances in which a character's death was final and due to its nature as a motivating factor and



implications regarding gender, Dewitt's death and its accompanying trope will be discussed in more detail later within this chapter.

Conversely, Katie, believes that the prevalence of death paired with the knowledge that any death is likely to be impermanent has resulted in death becoming less impactful and in fact has lowered the stakes attached to it. Katie explicates this stating,

I think one of the main reasons that death happens a lot in comics is because the medium has established an expectation that death isn't permanent. In comics it's become far more likely that your fave character will return from death than stay dead for any reasonable amount of time. That makes it an easy and ironically low stakes way for publishers to do something dramatic and shocking but without worrying about a long term impact like loss of readers. (Katie)

This suggests that death, as it exists within contemporary comic books, is not an event that expects its audience to attempt to engage with it in an emotionally meaningful way, contradicting the argument that "a story's primary goal is to produce meaning" (Popova, 2015: 42) and therefore a meaningful engagement. Rather, Katie suggests that death exists solely in terms of its narrative function, that is as a scenic "building block" (Bal, 2017: 96) that assists in moving the story from one place to another, which in this case is the provision of consequences within a given story. However, as the second sub theme - motivating factors - suggests, the raising of stakes is not the only consequence attached to death and as Claire states while:

Death is a popular way to raise the stakes for characters in fiction. If protagonists or their loved ones are in danger of dying – which is perceived as a final fatal outcome – it motivates them to act. (Claire)

'Motivating factors', the second of two sub themes that sit beneath the primary theme 'provision of consequences' further demonstrates participants' understanding of the narrative function of death within contemporary comic books. Motivating factors refers to instances in which participants have linked the prevalence of death to a need to move stories forward (Hakola and Kivistö, 2014) or create a situation likely to motivate a character to action (Vail et al, 2012). References to motivating factors were made by seven participants. Here, as with the previous sub theme, the data suggests that participants do not find the deaths that they encounter that fit within this sub theme to be particularly impactful, rather they accept them as a matter of convention within the genre that serve to expedite the narrative. This is highlighted by Leighton who states that:

I think the abundance of storylines revolving around death in comics usually stems from wanting to move a plot forward quicker or give a character a clear motivation without having to add pages of exposition. (Leighton).

Here death takes the place of exposition and serves as an expedient. Thus, suggesting that death itself is of less importance than its consequence.

Further discussion comes from Jane, who states "death is very rarely about the character dying in big superhero comics and more about whatever character will now be having Big Emotions about that death" (Jane: *capitalisation participants own*). Jane identifies that deaths in these instances do not serve to communicate anything about death itself, but rather what a death can achieve. That is, who will be affected, and what that effect will in turn lead to. An example of this can be found in the 'Jade Goody Effect' which saw an increase in women seeking cervical screenings following the highly publicised death of reality television star Jade Goody as a result of cervical cancer (Marlow, Sangha, Patnick, and Waller, 2012). Similarly focused on the use of death to propel a story through character emotion, Jamie noted that "death can be used as motivation for some characters and as a way to move characters, and the audience, from one emotion to the next" (Jamie). While the emotional response of audiences will be addressed in subsequent sections, the use of death to motivate or inspire emotion within the narrative raises the question of which emotions? As any

emotion ascribed to a character within a narrative must itself lead to action if it is to move the story forward. This again situates death as a tool which “affects characters and leads the story in some direction” (Hakola and Kivistö, 2014: x), but not a means for conveying anything meaningful about death.

This was followed up by Leanne who commented that “the aftermath can also be used as a narrative device, for character development” (Leanne). This suggests that it is the aftermath of the death, the consequences, rather than the death itself that is significant. Again positioning death as lacking significance as it occurs within these narratives. This is supported by Claire who says, “The loss of a loved one can be a massive motivating factor, and propel the story forward” (Claire). While instances of familial death and intimate partner loss will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, it is pertinent to note that these deaths are not thought to lead to the grief or emotional suffering one would usually associate with them, rather they lead to action. Which again positions the death as lacking significance in comparison to its consequence.

#### 4.1.2 The Role of Narrative - Audience Response

Moving to address the second theme, ‘audience response’ and its initial sub theme ‘internal emotion’ this subsection will continue to explore participant data as it concerns the prevalence of death within the superhero genre and its role in eliciting an audience response. Internal emotion here refers to instances in which participants referenced emotion or emotional responses specifically. These are often considered unearned due to the ease in which they are utilised and the frequency by which they are undone. Speaking on this, Sarah states that,

in shared continuity comics like the [DC Comics and Marvel Comics], death feels really common to me because it’s a quick narrative shorthand for an emotional response, and it can be used easily because deaths so infrequently

stick, and a character can be resurrected by the next writer to handle the character easily (Sarah).

Sarah highlights here the ease in which death is used, not as a means to consider death itself but as a route towards emotion. She links this ease directly to both the frequency and impermanence of death, thus further situating death as inconsequential to the characters who die. This argument is furthered by Cecilia who says,

Death can elicit a strong emotional response with little set-up or pay-off required. Deaths carry the maximum emotional depth without the need for real consequences, as the storyline will simply reset in a few years, or even months. (Cecilia)

Cecilia again highlights the ease with which death is utilised in addition to its nature as a shortcut. A quicker route to an end result. Death, as understood by these participants, does not function to inform audiences about dying, it instead exists to provoke a temporary response to a temporary situation. As such it is without consequence or meaning beyond the expected emotional response.

Some participants consider the utilisation of death in this way as manipulative. Casey for example, considers death “the go-to of emotional string-pulling,” (Casey). Similarly, Vanessa states, “death is such an emotive subject that generally most people can relate to in one way or another, so I think it’s an easy way to get people attached to a storyline” (Vanessa). This was supported by Hazel, who says,

I always think of the usage of death to sort of draw people in either by appealing to our own sadness over it in our personal lives or as a way of pulling down the feelings we have built up for a character. (Hazel)

Hazel's response suggests that creators are relying on audiences to already have experienced grief and loss in their personal lives and are seeking to transfer these emotions to the narratives they have constructed in order to give them weight. This is supported by Schiavone, Reijnders, and Boross, (2019) who argue that "through experiencing similar emotions of losing loved ones through media narratives, people are able to borrow elements from that simulation of grief that helps them cope with real life experiences or the expectation of death and grieving" (2019: 130). However, rather than adding significance to these deaths, Hazel argues that they in her experience render them as less significant as audiences are aware that the deaths that they are encountering within these narratives are not comparable to those they have encountered due to both their frequency and their impermanence.

'External drama', the second of two sub themes explored in this section, represents a contrasting audience response to that examined above. Here the audience response is not linked to a reaction connected to lived experience but rather the spectacular nature of drama and the dramatic as it intersects with mediated instances of death. The spectacular death as proposed by Johnson (2016) is an extension of Aries (1981) four stages of death and informed by Debord's spectacle (2014). Here death is highly visible and "inaugurates an obsessive interest in appearances that simultaneously draws death near and keeps it at arm's length—it is something that we witness at a safe distance with equal amounts of fascination and abhorrence, we wallow in it and want to know about it without getting too close to it" (Johnson, 2016: no pagination). It is this fascination that translates to interest and as such participants positioned the prevalence of death as a result of the creators' need to keep audiences engaged by increasing tension and excitement. This again highlights participants' understanding that death in these circumstances is used as a narrative tool and not for the purpose of engaging with death on its own terms. For example, as Tilly simply states, "people like the drama" (Tilly). Death in these circumstances transcends the mundane. It gives rise to excitement which in turn feeds engagement. This idea was supported by Claire who said, "death is dramatic. It has shock value" (Claire).

Some participants connect an increase in drama to the 'raising of stakes,' a concept addressed previously. With reference to the raising of stakes, Megan states,

It's dramatic to die, and to have characters experience the death of their loved ones! I think it's especially attractive as a narrative event or tool or whatever in serialized formats because of the unending nature of the medium—stakes keep escalating, all the time, but death remains important regardless of how big the baddie is. (Megan)

Here Megan has identified that in order to sustain pace with increasingly high stakes, the dramatic effect of any death must also increase. This need to continually increase both the stakes and dramatic effect of death as a result of the normalisation of the dead "through mass exposure to dead bodies" (Foltyn, 2008: 164). However, as demonstrated in section 4.1.1, neither the increasing of stakes nor drama translates to an increase in the significance of the death. As such the deaths in these instances are still viewed in terms of their narrative function and do little to convey meaning beyond their role.

One participant however viewed death as an end to drama and therefore a convenient way to end a story. As Leanne says for example, "it's a good fallback for a dramatic moment. Death is seen as the ending, a way to wrap up stories. To me, it's seen as a neat way to "finish" a story" (Leanne). While this represents an alternative perspective on the sub theme, drama, it is evident that this understanding also situates death as a tool. In this case a mechanism through which to draw a narrative to a close.

Through engaging with these themes as they emerged from participant data it becomes increasingly clear that participants do not view incidences of death as they occur within the superhero genre to be particularly significant beyond their role in

serving the narrative in which they are contained. Rather than a meaningful event with a narrative, participants see these deaths as shortcuts or exposition saving devices, functioning to provide consequences or elicit an otherwise unearned emotional response. Building upon and broadening the scope of these findings to further explore the significance of death in popular culture, the next section will consider representations of death, particularly those identified as memorable by participants.

## 4.2 Representations of Death

While participants expressed that they did not feel that the deaths they encountered within popular culture communicated anything meaningful about death, it became evident through engaging with the data that they did feel that these representations were able to communicate other meanings, specifically with regards to gender differences. This is evidenced by the themes that emerged from the data as it pertained to prompts regarding the ways in which representations of death are handled in popular culture. The themes that emerged from the analysis related primarily to gender with participants highlighting differences in the ways in which men and women are treated in death. Most notably, the deaths that occur specifically as a narrative device to spur another character's actions disproportionately feature women and marginalised people, therefore positioning these deaths as incidental and lacking narrative significance. In contrast, deaths that feature men tend to be central to narrative. As such the themes to be highlighted in this section are, 'women as disposable', 'women as objects', and 'men as heroes'. Notably, while the intention was to focus specifically on deaths found in mainstream western comic books, the participants broadened the discussion at this time to include comic book adjacent media which included but was not limited to manga, anime, and filmic adaptations. Additionally, while this section will provide examples drawn from media, it does not aim to produce case studies of any specific instances. However, overviews or synopses may be provided at times in order to provide further context to an example and better situate the reader.

## 4.2.1 Representations of Death - Women as Disposable

Addressing first the theme, 'women as disposable' this subsection will explore the ways in which participants have understood representations of death as communicating that women are expendable, often for the benefit of their male counterparts. This section also lends support to and expands the previously made argument regarding death and its role within narrative to argue that these conventions are not applied neutrally but are instead tied to gender and other marginalisation's. This was highlighted by participant Cecilia, who stated that:

women, people of color, teens and children, the elderly, disabled characters, and LGBTQ+ characters -- especially the intersections of these identities therein -- are treated as disposable. Their deaths are expected to happen to provide tragedy fodder for the plot. They're most often victims of cruelty and circumstance -- disproportionately so when compared to their white, straight, cis male counterparts. (Cecilia)

Here Cecilia groups women with people of varying other marginalisation's, thus positioning them in opposition and subordinate to straight, cisgender men. Additionally, she identifies that these deaths, much like those discussed previously, are used as tools that function merely to serve the central narrative, or as she succinctly puts it, as 'tragedy fodder'. Cecilia was supported in conversation by Hazel who said:

Yeah, at this point, aren't women and civilians almost just... expected to die? You're just waiting for it to happen because it always seems to happen - at least for one reason or another... (Hazel: *ellipses participants own*)

Similarly Tilly states that "women usually are portrayed as weak and being killed by someone stronger and more dominating" (Tilly). The expectation that women will die



is justified and evidenced across the media landscape. For example, the over representation of the deaths of women in the horror genre is highlighted by Clover (1994) who noted that victims are more frequently represented by women. Similarly, Penfold Mounce (2016) notes the “predominantly female” (2016:27) corpses found on forensic television shows and Shultz and Huet (2001) who found that women in film were twice as likely as their male counterparts to die. The notable disparity between who dies and why further supports the argument that the deaths of women, more so than their male counterparts, are the more likely to be utilised in service of another (male) character's central narrative.

Katie further expanded upon this and supported Cecilia's earlier point regarding marginalisation, saying:

I think that in 2022 fridging affects people of all genders but often people of color, especially of marginalized genders' deaths are depicted in a far more gruesome or grotesque way. (Katie)

This also raises the issue of visual representation, a subject that will be visited in depth later in this thesis (see chapters five and six).

Regarding the influence of gender on the role of death, additional support came from Rose who further demonstrated the discrepancy between the deaths of men and women as they occur to serve the narrative. Highlighting that,

male support characters dying to set dramatic stakes in the story is a rare enough occurrence that I can't actually think of one off hand, though I know they exist. On the other hand, a female example is so common there's literally a trope named after it, and a website named after the trope. It just gets old, after a while (Rose).

The trope that Rose is referring to is the “women in refrigerators” (Simone, 1999) trope, colloquially known as ‘fridging’. The term ‘women in refrigerators’ broadly refers to the “disproportionate amount of women, often superheroines, who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator” (Simone, 1999). As mentioned above, it more specifically references *Green Lantern* Volume 3, issue 54 (Marz, et al, 1994) in which Alexandra Dewitt, girlfriend to Kyle Raynor, the titular Green Lantern is murdered and stuffed into a refrigerator and is an example of an instance in which a death is used to expedite a plot. Fridging, or as Rowen identifies it, “the whole Women In Refrigerators thing,” (Rowen) was raised by nine participants and notably, while most participants were knowledgeable of the trope they did not all know the name of the character involved, only the names of her male counterpart. This is evidenced by Katie who in order to provide an example of what they viewed as the poor treatment of women in comic books referenced “Kyle Rayner’s girlfriend [who] was murdered and put in a fridge” (Katie). And Louise who made mention of “Kyle Rayner’s girlfriend -- WHO I DON’T EVEN KNOW THE NAME OF -- who is the reason we call it fridging” (Louise: *capital’s participants own*). This suggests that even in instances in which a woman’s death attracts notoriety - notice Louise’s capitalisation to emphasise her response to the realisation that she does not know this name - her position is still subordinate to her male counterpart. This is further evidenced by Jessie, the only other person to reference fridging in line with its origin, who explained that “Alex’s death was to help Kyle grow up and accept the power of the Green Lantern” (Jessie). Jessie followed this up, asking, perhaps somewhat pointedly, “why can’t men grow up on their own?” (Jessie).

Fridging was further referenced in line with alternative examples, all of which continue to highlight the role of death as a narrative function tied to gender. Claire for example, stated,

with regards to women, death as a plot device is a disaster. Everyone knows the term ‘fridging’ because it’s been so badly overused to propel male heroes’ stories, at the expense of female characters” (Claire).

This was further supported by Leanne, who stated “women have often been “fridged” to serve as a reason for a male character to do something and give them motivation, like an emotional push. It’s a cheap trick and reduces women down to what their “value” is to someone else. (Leanne). This value is remarked upon by Hong (2017) who notes that within the male narrative a woman’s worth “manifests only through their absence” (2017: 280). This is demonstrated by Tilly’s example, “Padme in Star Wars. Totally portrayed as weak and dying from a broken heart when she had two new born children to look after. Portrayed as strong until it was time to die” (Tilly). Padme, in this instance, died when her presence was no longer needed to progress the story, instead it was her absence that would further her partner's narrative. Casey also highlighted the use of fridging as a means by which to motivate male characters, referring to “the problem of fridging, where we see deaths of female characters used to further the motivation of a usually male main character” (Casey). This is further demonstrated by Kent (2021) who highlights the prevalence of fridging in filmic adaptations of Marvel properties and writes that while “women remain relatively passive within their own narratives, the role they play in the hero’s narrative is substantial” (2021: 43). Building upon Mulvey’s (2009) assertion that the presence of women in cinema serves to “freeze” the narrative, Kent argues that “in contrast, the woman in the refrigerator does not freeze the narrative but propels the hero’s story forward while remaining passive in her own” (2021: 43). Kayleigh too evidenced this line of thought, saying “I feel that comics use women characters, whether they’re heroes, villains, or civilians, as cannon fodder to progress the male hero’s arc. Fridging is surprisingly still happening” (Kayleigh). Additional examples were provided by Megan who said in response to Kayleigh,

[Kayleigh] pretty much hit my feelings about gendered deaths in monthly American comics above—the dominance of male protags who need plot propulsion means we see a lot of dead girlfriends and moms. The women’s deaths—or even not-quite-deaths—that jump to mind for me are also really, really ugly in their portrayals: Gwen Stacy, perennial example, getting her neck snapped by the sudden appearance of the laws of physics; Miles Morales’ mom’s fuckin slow, drawn out death at the hands of some weirdo monster in Ults; and every woman Matt Murdock has ever slept with. (Megan)

A further example provided by Jamie who brought attention to the long running horror comic book series, *The Walking Dead*, (Kirkman et al, 2003). Here Jamie highlighted the death of Laurie, stating “it was horrible. She was pregnant. I think she was shot in the stomach. There was nothing she could do” (Jamie). Another example was provided by Sarah, in conversation with Jane, who drew upon the relatively recent death of Rahne Sinclaire, stating,

I found Matthew Rosenberg’s recent *Uncanny X-Men* run to be wildly distasteful because of the way he leaned on death as a plot device. And also because of the nature of a lot of the deaths he wrote- Rahne Sinclair’s (a straight cis woman) murder being coded as transphobia in particular left a really bad taste in my mouth. But the run in general I think used death as a way to make readers feel like the stakes were high, but it just made me tired. I didn’t believe any of those deaths would last. (Sarah)

That was a terrible death -- her death didn’t focus on her as a character except metaphorically. (Jane)

Here Sarah discusses an instance of fridging, that of X-Man Rahne Sinclaire in *Uncanny X-Men #17* (Rosenberg and Gomez. 2019). In this issue readers see Rahne approached by a group of men who, on learning that she is a mutant, attack her whilst claiming that she is “trying to “trap” normal people” (Pfau, 2020). Here, as Pfau (2022) writes, “the language, the method of violence in this comic, is specific in its targeting. It’s what’s said of trans women by men after those women are murdered; it is known, nation- and world-wide as the trans panic defense.” In spite of this violence and the clearly affecting narrative quality of the death, Sarah still aligns its function with that of a narrative tool, situating the death as incidental to the larger narrative. This was supported by Jane who identifies that this death did not allow for audience engagement with the character. Instead it is suggested that the narrative

existed around her, not for her. Sarah also notes that deaths as they occur within comic books tend towards impermanence.

Rowen also provided an example of a memorable death, which again exhibits an instance of fridging, and its continued prevalence. Here Rowen recalls,

Jessica Cruz, who was coming out of the Justice League title and Green Lanterns only to be killed in some event series that I'm not sure resulted in anything. And that was last year. And not only was she a woman being fridged, she's a woman of color, who are even fewer and far-er between than white women as superheroes who get to occupy those kinds of books and spaces. (Rowen)

A further example of a death, highlighted as memorable that can be considered fridging is that of Ryouko Fueguchi from the anime adaptation of the manga series *Tokyo Ghoul* (Ishida, 2011). Cecilia highlighted this death and the effect it had on her,

The last death that bothered me to the point that it stuck with me for days after I finished watching a show was the death of Ryouko Fueguchi from the Tokyo Ghoul anime. Following the vicious murder of her husband by the antagonists, Ryouko and her young daughter Hinami are running from their lives as ghouls, a monstrous human sub-species that lives off human meat, hunted by a sadistic law enforcement task force that uses ghoul anatomy for weapons.

As a mother and grieving wife, Ryouko wasn't particularly well-defined beyond these simple, "relatably female" traits. Once she and Hinami are found out by the ghoul investigators, they're attacked in an alley. The investigators torment Ryouko and Hinami, using a weapon harvested from Ryouko's murdered

husband. Ryouko dies a grand, operatic death in front of her child, and is essentially harvested for parts to use against other ghouls.

But it was just so...cheap? The shot compositions, the music, the lingering camera's eye on Hinami as her mother is murdered like an animal by deeply sadistic monster cops, essentially. And, I get it? In losing her parents, Hinami is given the space to become a character and have an arc as she grows up in this brutal, ugly world where monsters are an oppressed class. Her father, who appears very briefly, dies bloody. Her mother also dies bloody, although you've been tricked into thinking Ryouko has a personality and an interior life outside "wife and mom." And the daughter is visibly tormented by all of this hell, only to watch her mother be decapitated in front of her and used as a weapon to hunt her in the future.

Father dies? Tragic but stoic. Mother dies? It's a passion play in front of a traumatized child. And everything in the scene is beating you over the head that this death is important and you should care, but nothing in the text actually supports this. Ryouko had no personality, and then died horribly. It just really bothered me for a while after I watched it, because it felt so unearned and tactless. (Cecilia)

This account draws together many of the issues discussed in this section and again highlights the use of death, and specifically women's deaths, to establish consequences for other characters, and provoke an audience response. This further supports the findings of the previous section and highlights that the use of death as a tool to support the narrative can be viewed as a gendered depowered practice.

#### 4.2.2 Representations of Death - Women as Objects

Moving to discuss 'women as objects', the second of three themes addressed in this section, this section explores instances in which participants' responses suggest that women have been objectified in death. This may relate to pose (Cocca, 2014), state or manner of dress (Madrid, 2009), or facial expression or posture (Roylance, Routledge and Balas, 2017). While this theme represents a far smaller portion of responses than the previous section it is of no less importance as it serves to further arguments regarding the link between gender and death as a narrative device.

Speaking on the link between gender and death, Sarah drew attention to what she viewed as a gendered difference in the ways that dead bodies are represented, stating,

I definitely also see a huge gendered component in how the death and dead bodies are depicted, in that many women's deaths in comics are sexualized, in a way men's deaths infrequently are" (Sarah).

This was supported by Sam who identified that "women are usually more... "posed" in death? Which I think is reflective of general cultural attitudes about women and their attractiveness (as such, even in death they are somehow desirable)" (Sam: *ellipses and parentheses participants own*). This 'posing' can be explained with reference to Foltyn's (2010) concept 'corpse chic'. Corpse chic describes the mainstreaming of death within the fashion industry which sees "supermodels and celebrities pose as cadavers (...) and glamorises the freshly or decomposing 'dead' body, transforming the alluring living body into an alluring 'dead' one" (Foltyn, 2010: no pagination). This relationship between death and fashion is built upon the notion that "death, like beauty, attracts and repulses us" (Foltyn, 2010: no pagination), and as a result creates new opportunities to engage with the voyeuristic gaze.

The arguments posed by Sarah and Sam are supported in part through examples provided by participants providing examples of memorable deaths, many of which were exemplar of the objectified women in death. For example, multiple mentions of Poison Ivy's 'appearance' on the cover of DC Comics' *Heroes in Crisis* issue #7 (King

and Mann, 2019) were made. The cover initially drew controversy when images were leaked online prior to its official release and the associated backlash led to the cover being cancelled (Barnhardt, 2019). The cover image depicts Ivy lying prone on the floor with her hips raised and cleavage exposed, drawing attention to her breasts, waist, and buttocks. She wears a tight green strapless leotard that is cut low in the front and the back. Her red hair is swept away from her face, falling loosely around her head, and her eyes are open, looking upwards towards the viewer. Blood is present but sparse and with the exception of her left hand which has a strip across the back that joins to her thumb and forefinger, can primarily be found flecked artfully around the floor and across her face in a somewhat morbid facsimile of freckles. In spite of the blood her skin is clear and she does not appear to have any visible wounds or injuries. Ivy in this image is supposed to represent a woman who has been murdered yet she is posed in a manner most commonly associated with erotic art. Making reference to the cover, Leighton stated,

I remember the issues revolving around the cover that had to be pulled when Poison Ivy got killed off in *Heroes in Crisis*. Many characters died in that story but they specifically chose her for the cover image and depicted her in a really fetishized way, which was in poor taste. (Leighton)

This fetishisation is comparable to that discussed by Gorer (1955). Gorer suggested that sex and death had switched places as taboo subjects, thus creating an audience for death, particularly in its more brutal, exploitative, and violent forms which Gorer considered pornographic. Although only compared to sex porn in this instance due to the voyeuristic nature of its audience, the idea has been developed to encompass an explicit sexualisation due to “a growing conflation of the two once forbidden bodies, the sex porn body and the dead porn body” (Foltyn, 2008: 166). This corpse porn engages not only to the voyeuristic and abject gazes usually associated with the observation of death but also caters to the necro-gaze (May, 2009), an embellishment of Mulvey’s male gaze (1975) which regards “dead women as passive, or as objects that induce curiosity and excitement, even inviting their



unveiling” (May, 2009: 170). It is a mode of objectification that inevitably strips its subject of agency, and couples femininity with weakness.

Further reference was made by Rowen who when bringing attention to a memorable death said, “one that comes to mind is that Poison Ivy Heroes in Crisis cover. Her bloody body bent in ways that aren’t physically possible to get most/all of her body in the space in a sensual/sexualized way” (Rowen). This is indicative of the “broke back” pose in which “a female character’s back is drawn unnaturally twisted as well as arched, displaying all of her curves in front and back simultaneously” (Cocca, 2014: 411). Claire also made reference to this death, stating “her death was so wrong, and her resurrection was weirdly handled. It makes me not like comics much, honestly” (Claire). Rose referred to the incident simply as “Poison Ivy and her sexy death,” and went on to say “It’s such a ridiculous, ongoing issue” (Rose). The issue of course, is not that the cover was removed from circulation, rather that this cover was produced in the first place, that the objectification of women in comic books and in death remains so prevalent.

#### 4.2.3 Representations of Death - Men as Heroes

Only one theme emerged from responses that centred the deaths of men: heroism. Heroes are primarily defined by their ability to do “the right thing at a critical moment” (Allison and Goethals, 2011:9) often via the overcoming of obstacles and resulting in a “great personal sacrifice” (Allison and Goethals, 2011:13). As a development of these ideas, the superhero is understood as “a heroic character with a universal, selfless, prosocial mission, who possesses superpowers (...) and a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume (Coogan, 2013:3). While the deaths of men were not often raised, when discussing how participants felt that the deaths of men are represented within popular culture it became evident that there is little dispute as to their perceived link to heroism. A link predicated on the characters narrative centrality and further legitimated by his ‘charismatic authority’ (Weber, 1968), a position gained through “proving his strength in life” (1968:22). These ideas

are demonstrated within the participants' responses, for example, Tilly, stated that “men seem to die in battle or in some heroic way, for instance protecting someone or saving the town/village/earth,” (Tilly). Here Tilly equates sacrifice with heroism, and it can be inferred that this sacrifice is agentic. That it is these characters' decision to undertake an action that will likely lead to death. This was echoed by Vanessa, who suggests that she has “often found male deaths to be really heroic and martyr-like” (Vanessa). This puts male deaths in opposition to their female counterparts of which there were no participant examples of heroic deaths.

More cynical in tone but similarly inclined to agree, Cecilia stated that “by and large, adult white men’s deaths are treated as heroic, if not god-like, in their sacrifice. White men die with dignity. Everyone else dies in fear and agony” (Cecilia). Here, Cecilia raised not only a gendered component, but a racial one, suggesting that it is not just men as a group who are afforded a heroic death but white men specifically. This is further evidenced by hooks (2009) who asserted that there is a “collective cultural agreement that black death is inevitable, meaningless, not worth much. That there is nothing to mourn” (hooks, 2009: 45). Cecilia goes on to provide an example, explaining that “everytime Captain America or Superman dies for our cheap entertainment, it’s treated as a great loss to the world both inside and outside of the text, with lasting implications,” (Cecilia). These assertions stand in strong opposition to the understandings and examples provided with regards to the deaths of women within popular culture.

Building upon these findings, the next section, *idealised deaths*, will explore what participants would consider necessary to achieving a meaningful death in these circumstances and will examine the typologies that emerge.

### 4.3 Idealised Deaths

In order to further explore participants' perception of death within superhero comics, this section will address themes as they emerged from data gathered in response to prompts regarding how participants define a 'good' or 'bad' death. As summarised within the literature review (see chapter two) theories concerning 'good' and 'bad' deaths, can be situated as linked to narrative constructions of death. While there are no universal or clearly defined definitions for either term (Kellerhear, 2007), contemporary understandings within Eurocentric communities situate 'good' deaths as those in which people are able to exercise a "degree of control over the death in terms of both location and timing" (Howarth, 2007: 134). Control, or agency therefore is considered a key factor in achieving a 'good' death, particularly as it relates to the physical quality of death for example, lack of pain and a retention of personal dignity (Howarth, 2010). 'Bad' deaths on the other hand are those thought to lack agency and encompass deaths that are violent, sudden or unexpected, or otherwise lacking dignity, (Kellerhear, 2007). While these categories provide useful starting points for discussing instances of death within superhero narratives, they become complicated by the nature of a superheroic death and the ways in which it blurs the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' by being simultaneously agentic, sudden, and violent. Similarly, it has become evident through analysing the data that within the narrative confines of the superhero genre that a 'good' death may not necessarily equate to either a superheroic or a narratively meaningful death.

Rather, in examining the data, two key themes have been identified that exemplify how participants classify death, both in terms of their lived experiences and narrative quality. The first of these, 'personal ideals' relates to general understandings of what participants believe constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' death. This will be discussed further in line with two sub themes, titled 'positive traits' and 'negative traits'. It has been found that largely these ideas align with contemporary academic conceptions of what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' death thus supporting the arguments made by contemporary death scholars (Kellehear, 2007; Howarth, 2010; Ko, Kwak, and Nelson-Becker, 2015; Wilson and Hewitt, 2018; Corpora, 2022; Gurdogan, Aksoy, and Kinici, 2022). The second theme, 'narrative ideal' highlights how participants' fundamental understanding of what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' death alters when that death is situated within a superhero narrative. This will be explicated via

discussion of two sub themes 'satisfying' and 'unsatisfying'. Here the sub theme 'satisfying' calls attention to instances through which participants are able to situate death as narratively meaningful rather than simply 'good' or 'bad'. Similarly, the sub theme 'unsatisfying' will examine how a death can be considered to be narratively meaningless, regardless of its construction as either 'good' or 'bad'.

#### 4.3.1 Idealised Deaths - Personal Ideals

Addressing the theme 'personal ideals' this subsection argues that participants understand the categories 'good' and 'bad' death as relating to the positive or negative characteristics that they associate with death and dying. However, in analysing participants' responses it has become evident that they predominantly centre personal agency or the ability to exert control of the situation in some manner. This can range from controlling the time and place of one's death to ensuring there is no pain, and that death comes at the end of a long life. This is most evident in the data situated within the sub theme 'positive traits'. Here four of the five participants who spoke of a 'good' death referenced agency or the ability to choose. Decision making as it relates to death as it represents a "natural extension of the privilege they have experienced their whole life" (Corpora, 2022:775), that is the ability to choose. Claire, for example, stated "a good death is one of your choosing, or one where you have some control" (Claire). Here Claire highlights both choice and control, factors that can themselves characterise what it means to possess personal agency. Similarly, Leanne says "I guess a good death is on your own terms" (Leanne). Leanne again highlights the necessity of choice whether that relates to the timing, location, or circumstance of one's death.

A further consideration in achieving a good death is acceptance. Death acceptance is often highlighted in discussions regarding the 'good' death and frequently considered a key factor (Krikorian, Maldonado, and Pastrana, 2019; Meier, et al, 2016). Notably, participants tend to pair acceptance with choice. This suggests that acceptance in these instances is an active practice rather than a passive one. This

can be seen in Jessie's response. Here Jessie stated "I think the only good death is one that's chosen or accepted" (Jessie). In positioning choice and acceptance as equal options, Jessie suggests they are similarly agentic. This attitude was echoed by Sam who said "a good death is a death someone chooses, accepts" (Sam). Again, acceptance is paired with choice in a way that suggests they are comparable and not alternatives and therefore agentic in nature.

Notably, Vanessa was the only participant to define a 'good' death in terms of its physical nature. Unlike the other participants who spoke of agency, choice, and acceptance, Vanessa situates a 'good' death as "dying painlessly in your sleep at the end of a long and happy life" (Vanessa), thus aligning with a popular conception of the 'good' death evidenced by Meier et al. (2016). This could of course be understood as relating to ideals regarding agency - one can choose to die free of pain, or in their sleep. However, I would argue that this scenario suggests that death would be not expected but accepted as natural. I would also argue that the acceptance exhibited in this circumstance represents a passive form of acceptance that does not align with the examples mentioned above. These illustrate a more active form of acceptance due to their close association with choice and agency.

Moving now to the second sub theme, 'negative traits', it was found that responses relating to what constitutes a 'bad' death proved more varied and far less focused than those related to 'good' deaths. Responses here also demonstrated less abstraction from the concept of death, as participants listed specific circumstances or types of death. Broadly, participants were concerned with the senseless nature of death, the capacity of death to inflict pain (Adesina et al., 2014), and an associated lack of dignity (LeBaron et al., 2015). However, it can be argued that while participants may have not explicitly stated that a 'bad' death is related to a lack of agency, their answers suggest agency or lack thereof remains a key factor in categorising death. Dignity in death, for example, is closely associated with agency in that it centres a person's ability to choose. Therefore, to suggest, as Louise does, that "bad deaths are ones that lack dignity" (Louise) is in fact to say that bad deaths are ones that lack agency. Further reference to dignity or a lack thereof, was made

by Tilly who linked a lack of dignity in death to a lack of capacity stating that “any death that robs you of things like being able to feed yourself or use the toilet yourself is undignified” (Tilly). This is supported by Wilson and Hewitt (2018) who note that “the physical incapacity of the dying person (such as being bedridden and dependent on others) was similarly considered a factor leading to an undignified and therefore bad death” (2018: 102). Similarly, De Jong and Clarke (2009: 64) found that the ‘bad’ death narratives of palliative care patients highlighted a concern “about losing control of their bodies and being forced to depend on the physical assistance of others”.

Furthermore, in listing the types or circumstances of death to be avoided it can be inferred that there are situations, both physical and social, that are preferable, that participants would choose if they were able. That is to say that they would exercise their personal agency with regards to their death. This can be understood in terms of the ‘right to die’ movement which links “assisted dying to issues of autonomy, choice and control” (Westwood, 2017:623), and demonstrates how personal agency can be applied to the decision-making process regarding death. As such, within the framework of assisted dying, one is able to exert the “ultimate expression of autonomy” (Westwood, 2017:610) so as to purposefully avoid certain kinds of death. The avoidance of death, particularly one likely to cause pain, is highlighted by Sam who believes that “a bad death is avoided, denied, and causes huge amounts of pain, not just to the one dying, but to witnesses or family and loved ones too” (Sam). If this is so then it can be reasoned that a ‘good’ or at least a preferable death to Sam would be accepted with limited pain to those involved. Acceptance (Ruiz-Fernandez et al, 2021), and choice regarding pain (Adesina et al., 2014) are again features of an agentic death as exemplified above. In contrast, Rowen describes a bad death as “one that comes too soon” (Rowen). Untimely deaths, particularly those categorised as sudden or unexpected are broadly understood as exemplary of ‘bad’ deaths (Adesina et al, 2014; Joarder et al, 2014; Ko et al, 2015). By identifying a premature death as indicative of ‘bad’ death Rowen furthers the argument that being able to choose the timing of one's death is of notable importance. This again highlights the importance that participants afford to agency as it relates to choice when identifying what qualifies a ‘bad’ death.

Additional arguments were made regarding a lack of meaning surrounding sudden or preventable deaths. For example, Kayleigh highlighted “pointless deaths, the ones caused by accidents” (Kayleigh). Here Kayleigh positions ‘bad’ deaths as pointless, which one could argue is true of all deaths, however it could also be reasoned that Kayleigh is actually referring to the difficulty found in attributing meaning to sudden deaths. Thus, death is bad because witnesses, for example, are unable to create a narrative that suggests otherwise. Alongside this Kayleigh presents an accidental death as an example of a ‘bad’ death. Categorised within existing literature as a “sudden or unexpected death” (Wilson and Hewitt 2018; Ko et al, 2015; Joarder et al, 2014), accidental deaths are broadly “considered bad because there [is] little or no opportunity to prepare for the death and ensure that a good death occurs” (2018: 92). While accidents cannot be situated as indicative of personal choice but rather they are a means by which choice and therefore agency is removed. This was echoed by Claire who suggested that “a bad death would be one that was meaningless. One that was preventable, or even just feels like it was” (Claire). Claire too leads with a reference to the narrative quality of death, supported by an indication that a loss of agency is of additional importance. These examples highlight not only the importance of personal agency in participants’ understandings of both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deaths, but also the role of narrative in creating meaning. This narrative quality will be expanded upon in the next subsection which explores how participants make sense of and categorise the deaths that they encounter within fiction.

#### 4.3.2 Idealised Deaths - Narrative Ideals

Moving to address the second theme, ‘narrative ideals’ and its sub themes ‘satisfying’ and ‘unsatisfying’, this subsection will continue to explore the data as it relates to participants’ understandings of what constitutes a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ death. However, unlike the previous subsection in which participants spoke of their real-world ideals regarding death, this subsection will focus on how they categorise the deaths they encounter within superhero fiction. It is here that participants draw

further attention to the role of narrative and its potential to generate meaning as they discuss death in terms of its narrative impact rather than its narrative function. Here a good death is not one that necessarily aligns with the aforementioned delineated category of 'good' death, rather it is one that conveys meaning beyond its previously discussed role within the narrative. This is equally true of 'bad' deaths. Participants also continued to stress the importance of personal agency, albeit a fictionalised interpretation. In discussing death in these terms participants have made it evident that they understand the link between death and narrative to be bidirectional. That is to say that, while they previously situated the deaths they had encountered within comics to be largely insignificant as a result of their use as a narrative tool, they also recognise the capacity of narrative to frame a death as significant and meaningful as posited by Gilbert (2010). Additionally, in positioning narrative as an indicator that supersedes previous conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' death participants have blurred the boundaries between these binary categories thus creating space to consider further typologies as they relate to death, and more specifically the superheroic death.

Considering first, conceptions of death that sit with the sub theme 'satisfying'. Broadly, satisfying in this instance encompasses a wide breadth of data that relates to the ways in which participants have communicated feelings of satisfaction or gratification with regards to a fictional death. This, however, is not to say that these deaths have necessarily rendered positive emotions in responses, but rather that participants feel that the deaths are narratively justified, closing, impactful, or meaningful in some way (Popova, 2015). As such it can be reasoned that when encountering a death within fiction, participants prioritise narrative impact over the physical or social nature of the death. For example, Sam would "consider a dignified death to hold some kind of narrative weight" (Sam). Narrative weight is used here to express impact as it relates to the narrative, and it is understood by its audiences. This idea is further demonstrated by Cecilia who explained a 'good' death as follows,



To me, a good/dignified/heroic death is a death that is part of the character's natural progression as a character. The death, whether the character is at peace with the reality of it or not, oftentimes should be an organic extension of their individual overarching plot. Even if it has no bearing on the progression of the plot on the macro level, a good death should mean something to the characters and the audience. It should have a material impact on those around them, good or bad, and be grounded in that emotional context. It doesn't have to be that big. It just has to matter to the world, and the death has to make sense for that character's story. Otherwise, it's cheap. (Cecilia)

Here Cecilia equates a 'good' death to a heroic or dignified one but grounds her understanding solely in how this death can be understood with reference to the characters narrative arc. Centering narrative in this way suggests that a 'good' or indeed 'satisfying' death is therefore not heroic by default but can become so through narrative means. Cecilia also highlights the importance of meaning, which she situates as being of greater importance than narrative function. Here, it does not matter if a death does not serve to expedite the narrative, only if it resonates both within the narrative and with its audience. This was supported in conversation by Hazel who said,

I agree - a good death is one that comes with reasoning, I think. Even in its randomness, if that's what it is (although in comics there isn't the same randomness as real life because they aren't having people just dying by getting hit by cars like we have out here.) If they die to spur action, it is action that still respects them somehow, doesn't distort or forget about them as it goes on (Hazel: *parentheses participants own*).

Hazel too recognises the importance of meaning as it is ascribed to the deaths encountered within fiction. In highlighting death as a call to action, Hazel also acknowledges that while the role of death in comics is often related to its function,

this function does not have to work to decentralise the character's impact. This was further developed by Cecilia, who went on to say,

I've always felt that death -- personal sacrifice -- is an easy shorthand for heroism that doesn't require a lot of broader context or depth of character to achieve. We're trained to see heroic sacrifice as something to aspire to, narratively, and to take at face value (Cecilia).

Here Cecilia expands upon the relationship between sacrifice and heroism, positioning it as a shortcut much like the narrative shortcuts proposed earlier in this chapter. However, rather than propelling the plot or provoking a specific response, this shortcut communicates something meaningful about the character, and in turn, their death. This link between a good death and heroism appears across the data set with seven participants making the same connection.

Highlighting the importance of narrative, particularly as it related to cause and effect, Emily stated that, "I think heroic deaths are ones that achieve the Good Deed that the person sacrificed their life for. In depictions of death as well as in stories generally, I like narrative causality and a feeling of satisfaction" (Emily: *Capitalisation participants own*). Here Emily suggests that it is not enough to die in the course of heroic action, but that the consequence of the sacrifice must be the accomplishment of whatever the character aimed to achieve. This sentiment is echoed by Vanessa who stated that "a heroic death would be dying for a good cause or dying whilst saving others" (Vanessa). This is exemplified by the "trope of the heroic last stand in defence of those more vulnerable" (Loidl, 2010: 181) and was further supported by Jane who believes that "there's a sense of martyrdom to a good death, whether you're saving another character's life or doing something impossible" (Jane).

The concept of narrative satisfaction was also raised in reference to the death of villains. This emphasises earlier assertions that a 'satisfying' death is not necessarily

a 'good' death by conventional standards, rather is a narratively meaningful death, for example a villain's death can serve to reinforce heroic narratives or demonstrate the consequence of wrongdoing (Cox, Garrett, and Graham's 2005). Casey for example noted that they "often find it satisfying narratively if a villain is hoisted on his own petard" (Casey). Here we see how what one would assume to be a conventionally 'bad' death can be considered satisfying. This satisfaction is echoed in Cox, Garrett, and Graham's (2005: 278) which demonstrate that while the deaths of villains are rarely found to elicit an emotional response, the deaths that are acknowledged are "done in a positive and celebratory manner". This was further exemplified by Jane who identified that "an embarrassing death or a humorous death, or one that truly belittles a villain would technically be a 'bad' death, but it would also be 'good' in the sense that it's satisfying from a narrative perspective" (Jane). This demonstrates how the lines between 'good' and 'bad' are disrupted and altered when considered in line with both fictionalised and heroic representations of death.

Further attention was brought to discussion regarding how participants were expected to qualify a 'good' or 'bad' death was made by Rose, who queried,

are we defining 'good' and 'bad' in the context of value as story beats or as 'moments that are important for a character'? A character can die cheaply and that can make a strong moment for the right kind of story, but too often it's not handled with enough care or thoughtfulness. It depends on what the character is trying to accomplish at the moment of death; is it a critical action upon which the plot hinges? Is it believable? Is it emotionally moving? There are so many variables in what goes into a 'good' or 'bad' death. (Rose)

This highlights that 'good' and 'bad' represent unstable categories that can be influenced along a variety of narrative axes. Furthermore, Megan demonstrated how much like conventional ideas regarding 'good' and 'bad' deaths, narratively 'satisfying' and 'unsatisfying' deaths are also constructed in opposition to each other.

This is most evident in Megan's response in which she constructs her answer by highlighting these oppositions. Megan begins by outlining a good death, stating "I think a 'good' death is one with narrative weight, where the effects of the death echo through the course of the story that follows" (Megan). This is immediately contrasted with her opinion on a 'bad' or, in this case, an undignified or unheroic death. Here she states that "an undignified or unheroic death can absolutely be good in a narrative, and a heroic or undignified one can frequently be bad" (Megan). This highlights the blurring of boundaries that comes as a result of classifying deaths in line with their narrative impact rather than their ability to meet the criteria set out by conventional understandings of 'good' and 'bad' deaths. Megan goes on to clarify her response, stating,

Good deaths generally are agentive, and narratively impactful. Heroic, dignified deaths are often self-sacrificial, in one way or another; agency is again important here. Bad deaths are not those things, and also often also ones that emphasize the expendability of marginalized characters. Undignified deaths are those lacking agency, or agentive deaths that aren't afforded the narrative weight required to make them feel important. (Megan)

Here Megan delineates what makes a good death and what makes a heroic death but notably does not equate the two. However, she does position agency as key to both conceptions. Similarly, she highlights undignified deaths, which can be understood as bad or potentially unheroic in this instance, as lacking agency.

Further reference to agency was raised frequently when discussing the concept of fridging as it aligns with 'bad' or 'unsatisfying' deaths. Fridging, as outlined above (see section 4.2.1) refers to instances in which women are "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" (Simone, 1999: no pagination). Fridging represents a gendered expression of death within comic books and is the only gender specific death that was raised by participants in response to this question. Sarah for example, highlighted fridging as an example of a 'bad' death. She additionally links

this to a lack of dignity which can be understood as relating to agency as argued in previous sections of this chapter and a lack of satisfaction with regards to the narrative in which it is embedded. Stating that “thinking about undignified deaths, I think a lot of fridging and murder tends to feel like a “bad” death to me, because those deaths are written in a way that feels disrespectful to the characters and to the reader” (Sarah). Here death is bad not because of its physical nature, but because of its narrative quality. This was supported by Jane, who makes further reference to the lack of satisfaction associated with these deaths, stating “I think with fridging, a lot of the frustration is that it’s cheap on a narrative level. There’s nothing “satisfying” there because you don’t know that character so the emotions aren’t there” (Jane). Fridging was also raised by Casey who stated that “undignified deaths are not narratively significant and feel like they are there to add to the body count in a way that cheapens them. Like fridging” (Casey). Here fridging is given as an example of an undignified death which is in turn equated to a death which lacks narrative significance. Further reference to fridging was made by Louise who again positioned heroic death as a category separate to instances of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘satisfying’ and ‘unsatisfying’ death. Here Louise states “fridging is a bad and undignified death EVEN if it’s also a heroic death” (*Capitalisation participants own*). This further demonstrates how participants position superheroic death as a discrete category that is not influenced by conventional understandings of either a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ death.

In analysing the data it has become evident that the categories ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are not useful typologies through which to discuss death as it occurs within comics. This is due to the blurring of boundaries that occurs because of the nature of superheroism and the significance of narrative in delineating both function and meaning. Rather the data suggests that a superheroic death is a death that is characterised by sacrifice and usually occurs in the line of heroic action. However, a heroic death does not necessarily equate to either a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ as they would be understood in relation to deaths as they occur in real life. Instead, these deaths must be considered in relation to their narrative impact. Impact in this instance is measured through audience satisfaction where a satisfying death is one that is found to be meaningful and has narrative impact. Notably this can relate to both conventionally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ death, a hero dying in the course of action for example

would most likely die suddenly, at a young age, and as the result of violence - all hallmarks of a 'bad' death. As such this allows for the creation of new typologies from which to position and discuss heroic death. Moving forward a narratively satisfying heroic death will be considered synonymous with a good or ideal deal and a narratively unsatisfying heroic death will be considered to align with a bad death.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

Having explored the themes that emerged from the data, this chapter argues that participants understand the prevalence of death in contemporary comics that sit within the superhero genre as being linked to its narrative function. Death in these instances is a tool used to move the story forward quickly and easily, create tension, or provoke an emotional response without having to rely on lengthy exposition. Additionally, this chapter argues that the deaths that occur specifically as a narrative device in the service of another character, disproportionately feature women and marginalised people, therefore positioning these deaths as lacking narrative centrality, and representing women in death as disposable or objectified. As a result, this then prioritises the stories of straight, white, cisgender males. In contrast, men's deaths are more likely to be considered to be both superheroic and central to the narrative. As such, this chapter argues that the deaths of men, unlike those of their female counterparts, are more likely to be considered both heroic and narratively important.

Furthermore, this chapter argues that participants understand 'good' and 'bad' death as they relate to fictional deaths in terms of narrative satisfaction. Participants also consider a heroic death to be a discrete category, that is separate from their understandings of 'good' and 'bad' and predominantly describes the motivations that lead to death. Accordingly, this chapter argues for the creation of new typologies to be utilised when discussing the deaths of superheroes as they occur within comic books. Firstly, is the superheroic death, which is an agentic death that occurs in the line of superheroic action, for example a self-sacrificing death. This death can be

either 'good' or 'bad' in conventional terms, however this designation does not convey the impact or significance of the death, rather what motivated the death. Impact or significance is measured through narrative satisfaction. Therefore a narratively satisfying heroic death will be considered synonymous with a 'good' or 'ideal' death and a narratively unsatisfying heroic death will be considered to align with a 'bad' death.

Building upon these findings, specifically those concerning the role of narrative and gender, chapters five, *Superheroes, Masculinity, and Death*, and six, *Superheroes, Femininity, and Death*, will further examine what representations death can communicate about gender. Focusing on visual representations via the in depth analysis of comic book covers via compositional interpretation and participant data, these chapters will explore emergent themes regarding gender and heroism.

# Chapter Five: Superheroes, Masculinity, and Death

In the previous chapter, narrative significance was shown to be a key factor in participants' understanding of death as it occurs within popular culture broadly and comic books specifically. There it was identified that many of the deaths encountered by participants functioned solely as devices through which to expedite the plot and, as a result, were found to lack broader narrative importance. Additionally, it was argued that the deaths that are used in this way disproportionately feature women, therefore positioning these deaths as not only lacking narrative centrality, but representing women in death as disposable, and objectified. Conversely men's deaths were found to be considered both heroic and central to the narrative. Building on these findings, and bringing its focus towards visual representations of death, this chapter will address the following research questions:

- I. Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?
- II. How do gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?

By focusing on the visual rather than the narrative quality of these deaths, this chapter will address how these gendered notions are communicated through visual means. As such, it will be argued that even when not supported by a clear or cohesive narrative the deaths of male superheroes are more likely to be understood as superheroic by audiences.

The findings will be demonstrated across three sections, all of which will engage with visual representations of death through a compositional interpretation (CI) and participant data via thematic analysis. The first section, *Hegemonic Heroic*



*Masculinity*, will address the themes 'action' and 'strength'. This section will examine how participants understand and categorise visual representations of death that do not exist within a narrative. This section will also consider the ways that participants construct and apply concepts such as agency using visual information. The second section, *Complicit Heroic Masculinity* will continue to engage with the theme's 'action' and 'strength'. This section will examine how participants conceive superheroism, and the superheroic death with reference to superheroes who embody aspects of Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) conceptualisation of complicit and marginalised masculinities. Due to the constraints of the dataset this section will focus specifically on the social marginalisations of disability and age. This will be followed by *Deviant Heroic Masculinity*, which will address the theme 'uncertainty'. This section will demonstrate how, unlike marginalised characteristics such as disability or age which can be overcome in order to achieve a heroic death, deviant attributes such as race and proximity to femininity are reproduced and reinforced in death.

Each of these sections, therefore, will highlight the themes as they emerged from the compositional interpretation and the data derived from participant discussions pertaining to the images in question. Prior to addressing these themes, this chapter will present a brief overview of the literature as it pertains to superheroes, masculinity, and death. Additionally, while the thesis will not provide detailed outlines of each character's history, further insight may be necessary at times in order to bring further clarity to the reader with regards to participant data. While all participants are broadly engaged with comic book culture, they were not all familiar with every character they were presented with within the focus group setting. Those who were familiar also showed differing levels of engagement and prior knowledge.

## 5.1 Hegemonic Heroic Masculinity

As highlighted within the literature review (see chapter two), gender represents an important signifier within comic books, particularly those within the superhero genre (Bongco, 1999; Baker and Raney, 2007). This is most notable in the "gender

stylization of men and women” (Robbins, 2002: no pagination), that is to say, how they are visually represented. These representations can be understood as products of derivatization. Cahill (2011) describes derivatization as:

to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being’s identity, desires, fears, etc. The derivatized subject becomes reducible in all relevant ways to the derivatizing subject’s existence (Cahill, 2011: 32)

While similar in part to theories of objectification, derivatization can be applied more broadly across any number of political or social frameworks. With regards to superheroes, for example, this can be seen when ‘fans demand of their heroes not only excellent performance but the fulfilment of certain moral standards they are requiring those heroes to embody and represent a desired ideal’ (ibid., 2011: 33). As the culture of mainstream superhero comic books is dominated by “straight white men” (Sava et al., 2014) it may be said that “superheroes [are], in essence, about celebrating masculinity” (Chute, 2007: 278). As a desired ideal, this masculinity is predominantly constructed in line with western, Eurocentric ideals and ideologies, as evidenced by the representation of male superheroes as “asexualised cyphers of hyper-masculinity, with big muscles and bigger guns” (Rucka, 2013 as cited in Cocca, 2014: 411). Here, masculinity can be further understood through Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) re-framing of hegemonic masculinity as a hierarchical system which celebrates certain embodiments of masculinity while simultaneously denigrating those who are unable or unwilling to comply with the hegemonic ideal. Within this framework hegemonic masculinity embodies “the currently most honored way of being a man” (2005: 832), and positions other forms of masculinity as inferior or deviant. These inferior masculinities are categorised as complicit masculinities, those that do not meet the criteria of hegemonic masculinity but continue to support and benefit from it; marginalised masculinities, those that are perceived as inferior due to the presence of additional socially constructed marginalisations such as race, class, ethnicity, and disability; and subordinate masculinities, those that are considered deviant such as effeminate, homosexual or trans-masculinities. Within

this framework, masculinities “can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men” (ibid., 2005: 838), however “the modern superhero’s bulging muscles, incredible powers, moral superiority, and ensured victories position them as symbols of hegemonic masculinity par excellence” (Brown, 2021: 2).

These frameworks can be extended to better understand the superheroic death, which is to say that the superheroic death is both a product of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and derivatization (Cahill, 2011). It must therefore represent the most honoured way of dying whilst simultaneously meeting fan expectations of excellence and moral standards. As such, if a superhero is to die, the death must not undermine the hegemonic ideal that is embodied by the superhero, rather it must continue to support the ideologies that position masculinity as hegemonic and, by extension, superheroic. Additionally, death must adhere to the desired superhero ideal. Consider, for example, the narratively satisfying heroic death theorised in the previous chapter (see chapter four, section 4.3.2), that is, an agentic death characterised by sacrifice, which usually occurs in the line of heroic action, and is found to be meaningful and narratively impactful by audiences. This is the exemplar of the deaths afforded to male superheroes and, as such, represents the hegemonic and derivatized ideal. However, as previously discussed (See chapter four), these deaths require a narrative element to fulfil the requirements of a ‘good’ death. Due to the nature of the images discussed by participants, that is comic book covers that were used as variants across a number of narratively unrelated titles, the full narrative surrounding the death is absent. Therefore, participants were required to make their assessments of the deaths using only their prior knowledge of the character should they possess any, and the elements contained within the image.

However, even in the absence of narrative, participant data suggests that the deaths of male superheroes represented across the data set are broadly understood to be superheroic, with many being considered narratively satisfying. Notably, these understandings were also applied to superheroes who do not fit the criteria for hegemonic masculinity but instead exhibit complicit forms of masculinity. Complicit

masculinities function to both support and reinforce hegemonic masculinity through actions that represent efforts to overcome aspects of their person, such as disability, that would otherwise position them as representative of subordinate or marginalised forms of masculinity. This further evidences that superheroic masculinity is linked not only to the “most honoured way of being a man” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 838) but to perceived acts of superheroism, that is superheroic behaviour as it is derivatized by the audience. Superheroic behaviour here manifests primarily as visible indications that the character has or is currently fighting back. That they are exhibiting some form of agency within the situation, even if that situation appears futile. As such, two key themes that describe the relationship between hegemonic superhero masculinity, death, and cultural views regarding power and agency have been identified as emerging from the data as it pertains to each image individually and as part of a larger set. The first of these themes is action which can be understood as the ability to “make things happen and control events” (Mulvey, 1975: 63), that is to say that action denotes the active subjectivity of a person. Within the superhero comic book, action is characterised by the demonstration of power through violence (Bauer et al, 2017) and can be understood in reference to three typologies:

instrumental (i.e., violence that is deployed as a negatively valued yet necessary or at least legitimate means of achieving positive ends), aggressive (i.e., violence that one succumbs to or even enjoys, that is engaged in passionately or for its own sake), and sacrificial or sacred (i.e., violence that, recognized as not being altogether eliminable, is taken upon the self rather than directed outward or permitted to fall on others). (Wanner, 2016: 178)

Violence as exhibited by the superhero is largely instrumental and is primarily demonstrated through acts of retaliation or ‘fighting back’. This however can transform into sacrificial violence in the face of certain death should the superhero not surrender or retreat. As such this theme reflects visual representations of the physicality of this violence and its role in demonstrating the superheroes' subjectivity. This can extend to: fighting, whether this is instrumental, defensive, or sacrificial; the

presence of weapons or powers, whether representative of real, fictive, or fantastical; and the presence of blood or injury. The second of these key themes is strength. Here strength is emblematic of the superheroes masculinity (Brown, 2002) and can refer to either the superheroes strength of body or their strength of character (ibid.). When referencing strength of body this theme describes visual representations of musculature, and the physical overcoming of obstacles. Strength of character however refers to actions that are considered to represent moral goodness, for example, virtuous acts of superheroism, or acts of pacifism (Wanner, 2016).

### 5.1.1 Magneto - Action

Addressing first the theme 'action' as it manifests visually and is evidenced within both the compositional interpretation and participant data, this section argues for the importance of action in asserting agency, a key component of the superheroic death. References to action can be found in both the compositional interpretation (CI) and participant data. Focusing first on the compositional interpretation, action emerges as integral to the composition of the image (see fig. 2). In describing the image, the compositional interpretation states,



*Fig. 2 – ‘Magneto’ - All-New, All-Different Avengers #12 variant by David Nakayama*

*The image (fig. 2) shows a white man, Magneto, centrally positioned, in a three quarter profile facing toward the right side of the page against a backdrop of a cloudy night sky. His body is angled diagonally from the bottom left corner to the top right corner. While he appears to be being pushed backwards his body language is open with his arms positioned in front of his body and palms open. Multiple projectiles fly towards and past him, again diagonally from the bottom left corner to the top right corner, demonstrating that Magneto is engaged in battle. Additionally, there are holes in Magneto’s cape where bullets have penetrated and splashes of blood emanating from his right hand, midsection, back, and left leg. His left hand is surrounded by a*

*glowing energy that suggests that he is utilising his superpowers to fight back. Notably there is no indication as to who Magento is fighting or who is responsible for this violence. (CI)*

In presenting Magneto as the centrally aligned, sole character, the image functions to highlight his importance within the scene (McCloud, 2006). Moreover, in omitting his aggressors, the image further functions to centre Magneto as it renders his aggressors as less important through this omission. As a result Magneto can be understood to be as Mulvey (1975:63) suggests making “things happen” rather than having things happen to him, he is active within the action. This is further demonstrated through the representation of violence within the image. Here, violent action is emblematic of Magneto’s position as a superhero (Phillips, 2022). Both instrumental and sacrificial, Magneto is shown engaged with violence through both his own use of power and through the visible representations of blood and damage to his costume. These details can again be read as signs of active participation rather than of passive withdrawal and thus further positions Magneto as an active and agentic subject within the image.

It is this active engagement that resulted in participants' failure to link this image to Magneto's death. One could argue that despite the violence represented within the image, there is little in the image (fig.2) that suggests that Magneto is actually destined for death. It is only in knowing that the theme of this image is ‘Your favourite X-Men dead and dying’ (Yehl, 2016) that the inevitability of death is made apparent. This discrepancy between the image's (fig.2) theme and its content was highlighted by participants' responses. For example, Tilly, who, when made aware that the image (fig.2) was themed around the concepts of death and dying, remarked that in the absence of further information, she would have thought he was “winning”. Tilly went on to say that she would be “expecting the man to be triumphant and win” (Tilly). Here the participant linked the concepts of victory or winning to the character's position of superhero and their preconceived notions that a facet of superheroism is embodied through being “heroic enough to withstand and triumph” (Brown, 2002: 124). This position is further supported by Vanessa who said that the image (fig.2)

makes her think that he is “a badass superhero who is gonna be awesome at everything and eventually win whatever battle”. Even though there is no explicit evidence within the image to suggest Magneto may be victorious, the action-violence represented within is understood as instrumental rather than sacrificial and as such victory is assumed because as Gleiser (2007: 10) suggests “the heroes will always eventually win”. This is in line with the derivatized superheroic ideal which positions the superhero as undefeatable within the popular imagination, a long standing effect of the Comic Authority Code which stated, “that in the end good shall always triumph over evil” (ibid.).

### 5.1.2 Magneto - Strength

Addressing the second theme, strength, this section will continue to explore the visual means through which heroism is understood and constructed. Strength here relates to both the physical and the moral quality associated with the derivatized superheroic ideal. Within the compositional interpretation reference to strength is made with regard to physical attributes, stating,

*He is dressed in a red and purple superhero costume complete with helmet and cape. While tight fitting, the outfit is not one that would be typically considered sexualised or revealing -- the only skin on show is on his face -- and works to accentuate the idealised male physique. (CI)*

The idealised male physique referenced here is the same physique associated with both the superhero and the hegemonic masculine ideal. That is to say white, cisgender, able-bodied, and muscular (Lawrence, 2016; Lefkowich et al, 2017). It is however the muscularity that is indicative of physical strength (Frederick et al, 2017), with strength itself being linked to superheroism (Bainbridge, 2009). Additionally, the use of costume is highlighted as it functions to accentuate the male physique. This builds upon Plotz’s (2023: 3) argument that the superhero's costume plays an



“important role” in the gendered perform of the superhero as “it highlights the muscularity of the body and at the same time draws attention to the body’s actions, to how these muscles are engaged”. The interpretation goes on to focus specifically on the facial expressions of Magneto,

*His mouth is open as to indicate shouting or screaming and both sets of teeth are visible and his eyes are open and appear to be facing in the direction of his presumed attacker. (CI)*

The baring of teeth here can be considered a sign of aggression and rage (McCloud, 2016), an expression that functions to make the bearer “appear physically stronger” (Zhang, 2018: 2). Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, the visible expression of emotions is broadly prohibited as it is understood to lead to a “reduced masculine standing” (River and Flood, 2021: 910) however, this is counterbalanced when “expressing emotions such as anger through acts of violence” (ibid.) as rather than diminishing ones masculine status this is found to enhance it (ibid.). Furthermore, this open display of emotion contrasts Goffman’s (1979) conceptualisation of ‘licensed withdrawal’. Conceived through a systematic investigation of print advertisements, ‘licenced withdrawal’ represents a form of ‘gender display’ (ibid., 1979: 1), that is a “conventionalised portrayal” of an exaggerated or stereotyped gendered behaviour linked to the similarly gendered social hierarchies which reproduce and reinforce the notion that men are naturally dominant. As such ‘licensed withdrawal’ highlights instances when,

an emotional response causes an individual to lose control of his facial posture, he can partly conceal the lapse by turning away from the others present or by covering his face, especially the mouth, with his hands. (ibid.: 57)

This observation indicates the normalisation of the suppression of visible expressions of emotion, an idea that is further demonstrated by River and Flood (2021: 911) who argue that “men learn to conceal emotions such as fear, sadness and grief in order to distinguish themselves as men”. However as evidenced by Zhang (2018) and River and Flood (2021) the need to conceal emotions, particularly those related to anger, lessen when those emotions are paired with violence due to its connection with strength and ability to reinforce masculinity. As such Magneto's visible expression of rage as it intersects with the superheroic action-violence in which he is engaged, serves to highlight his masculine, and by extension his superheroic status.

Participants made far more literal references to the perceived strength of the character, linking it to his broader characterisation. Tilly for example described the character as a “totally strong man, who I'm guessing just from how he is portrayed, has some kind of super strength” (Tilly). Here Tilly understands Magneto's visible musculature and body language as indicative of super strength. Notably Magneto does not have super strength rather he possesses formidable psychic powers that circumvent his need for physical strength. As such his muscles are functionally redundant, serving instead to visually communicate his superheroic masculinity and the powers that would otherwise remain invisible. Vanessa went further in her assessment, expounding on the character's potential personality, stating that he “looks like a bit of a loveable rogue, like he looks like someone you perhaps wouldn't mess with? Exploding into the room and saving the day?” (Vanessa). To suggest that one “wouldn't mess with” Magneto indicates Vanessa's belief that in an altercation Magneto would be victorious as would be expected of a superhero (Gleiser, 2007), particularly one who due to the exaggerated musculature looks to be imbued with super strength. The relationship between musculature, strength and superheroism is further illustrated by Vanessa's assertion that he looks like he would “save the day.” This demonstrates how looking like a superhero, even in the absence of a clear narrative - recall we do not know who or why Magneto is fighting - is enough to communicate superheroism to participants who are otherwise unfamiliar with his character and backstory because as Gleiser (2007: 10) suggests “the heroes will always eventually win”. Furthermore, Vanessa 's response demonstrates the

ways in which participants begin to construct superheroic narratives to make sense and confer meaning and how these narratives rely on participants' understanding of the visual markers of action and strength to convey superheroism.

Subsequently, when asked to reflect on the kind of death, that is for example a 'good death' or a 'bad death' participants would expect for Magneto based on the image both participants agreed that it would be heroic in nature. Tilly for example, stated that "If he dies, it'll be heroic. And it'll be dignified" whilst Vanessa said, "I agree, it's heroic". In designating the death as (super)heroic participants are reinforcing their belief and understanding that the action within the image is also (super)heroic. While the viewer, in this case, the participants, are unable to see the aggressor, they have constructed a narrative that positions Magneto as the hero and therefore fighting in either defence or to protect another. Additionally, in displaying disbelief that Magneto was intended to die suggests that the kinds of narrative constructed by participants are not ones in which the hero succumbs, rather they are ones in which the hero triumphs (Brown, 2002; Gleiser, 2007).

By engaging with these themes as they emerged from the data it is evidence that action as it is communicated through violence serves to demonstrate the superheroes active subjectivity. Additionally, visual indications of strength function to reinforce the hegemonic masculine ideal that is embodied by the contemporary superhero and by extension renders death as similarly superheroic. Furthermore, it has become evident that even in situations where a clear narrative is omitted, and very little is known about a character, participants are willing and able to construct a narrative that allows them to establish meaning and understanding (Gilbert, 2010; Hartog et al, 2020).

Building upon and broadening the scope of these findings to further explore the ways in which heroic deaths are informed by concepts of action and strength. The next section will consider further visual representations of death, in particular those that

feature superheroes who express marginalised forms of masculinity as theorised by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

## 5.2 Complicit Heroic Masculinity

In order to further understand how participants understand visual representations of death, this section will continue to address the themes 'action' and 'strength' as they emerge from the data, both compositional and participant, as it pertains to the deaths of male superheroes. Within this section 'action' will again refer to the superheroes perceived engagement with the scene and is largely characterised by visual evidence of violence. Similarly, 'strength' will refer to representations of both the superheroes physical strength as demonstrated through musculature and their strength of character as evidence through acts of moral goodness or the overcoming of physical or psychological obstacles. Moving forward, this section will be focusing on the deaths of heroes whose expressions of masculinity align with marginalised forms, that is disability in the case of Cable (fig. 3), and old age in the case of Logan (fig. 4) but serve as 'complicit' to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) through the action and strength that renders them superheroic. That is to say that while these expressions of masculinity do not meet the criteria for hegemonic masculinity, they still function to support its position of dominance (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

### 5.2.1 Cable - Action

Addressing first the theme 'action' as it is represented visually and is evidenced within both the compositional interpretation and participant data, this subsection continues to argue for the importance of action in asserting agency, a key component of the heroic death. References to action can again be found in both the compositional interpretation (CI) and participant data. Focusing first on the compositional interpretation, action, understood here as evidence of violence, is

clear (see fig. 3). In describing the contents of the image, the compositional interpretation asserts,



*Fig. 3 – ‘Cable’ - Invincible Iron Man #11 variant by Juan Gedeon*

*The image shows two men. The man in the foreground, Apocalypse, has his back to the viewer and is standing with his legs apart, his arms to his sides with his fists clenched, and shoulders raised... there are blood spatters on his arms and legs, with more dripping from his clenched fists.*

*In the background, framed between the other man's legs is a second man, Cable. He is doubled over on his knees, supporting himself on his right arm with his fist clenched, and facing the viewer's left. He too is shown to have blood spatters, however in this instance they are on his face and right arm. Additionally, his left arm, a metallic prosthetic, is broken off at the elbow. (CI)*

The composition of the image positions Apocalypse visually as the more dominant of the men, trapping *Cable* between the frame of his legs (Whitehead, 2014) and therefore demonstrating Apocalypse's power. This serves to position the characters in opposition and demonstrate to the viewer who holds the power. This can be further explained using Goffman's (1979: 28) conceptualisation of "relative size". While initially intended to demarcate the gendered power hierarchies demonstrated within advertisements, relative size provides a framework from which to understand how power and authority are negotiated visually through height and size differences. Here for example, Apocalypse's presence within the image is characterised by his size, not just his height and musculature but the space he fills within the frame. As such his power is made visible. However, in contrast to Goffman's argument by situating him facing away from the viewer and removing his head the image functions to dehumanise Apocalypse positioning him not as a man whose power is reflected by his size, but as an obstacle to be overcome. It is through dehumanisation such as this that violence can become legitimated (Opotow, 1990; Zlobina and Andujar, 2021) if not deemed socially acceptable (Hodson et al, 2014) and appropriate.

While the characters do not appear to be actively engaged in violent action, evidence of violence can be identified in the presence of blood on both characters. The presence of blood is not uncommon within the heroic and superheroic narrative because as Lynch argues (1997: 31), "blood is the basic currency of fights and quests". Within the mediaeval chivalric literary tradition for example, men bleed "to prove valor, to avenge unjust wrongs, and to impose justice" (McCracken, 2003: 10). This parallels the role of the contemporary superhero whose mission can be described as similarly "pro-social" (Coogan, 2013:3). Furthermore, the placement

and distribution of the blood in the image suggests that it is Cable who bore the brunt of the violence, this paired with his position on his knees might imply that Cable is submitting (Pinkus, 2020) in preparation for defeat. However, Cable is seen to be raising himself rather than lowering. This is not suggestive of submission or deference, rather it is indicative of his intention to continue to fight. This indicates that although injured, Cable is still an active, agentic participant within the scene.

Further evidence of violence is demonstrated through the representation of Cable's broken prosthetic. This serves to disarm and depower Cable - both literally and metaphorically - whilst demonstrating the comparative strength of Apocalypse who has been able to cause such destruction. Although removed from his source of power, Cable is shown to persist thereby representing his ability to overcome his disability and therefore his marginalisation. Therefore, rather than demonstrating weakness, Cables' injury provides "an opportunity to prove strength, and strength testifying to masculinity (Kafer, 2013: 87). This evidences Cable's complicity to the hegemonic masculine hierarchy that would otherwise penalise him for his marginalisation. Furthermore, positioning disability as something that can and should be overcome is the foundation of "inspiration porn" (Grue 2016; Pulrang, 2019; Shelton and Waddell, 2021). That is the use of disabled people overcoming obstacles to achieve various feats for the purpose of providing inspirational narratives to an audience who is presumed to be able bodied.

Participant data also highlighted the presence of action, emphasising its capacity to suggest narrative and through that narrative, agency. Megan, for example, states "I *do* like that there's a story implied by the image — Cable has put up a fight, he's still defiant, and he's about to get pounded into the ground. The composition works for me" (italics participants own). Megan goes further in discussing the image, saying.

The narrative implications here feel as though they are at the forefront of the image: I can imagine a struggle wherein Cable tries his damndest but can't best the superhuman power of Apocalypse and gets his big ol' robot arm

ripped off, but continues valiantly fighting until he simply doesn't have anything left in him, as shown by the fact that he's on his knees but still trying to push himself up. Apocalypse is huge, taking up most of the image, and looming above Cable, so he's got the power and control in this situation, but even if he stomps Cable into the dust, Cable will still have been exerting his own will, right up until the end—he's not falling, he's not shot from afar, he's *defeated*. (Megan: italics participants own)

Here Megan highlights how the image positions Cable as agentic within this action arguing that he is engaged and active within a fight even in the face of defeat. By emphasising that this is representation of defeat rather than surrender or submission, Megan aligns Cable's imminent death with one that is narratively satisfying in addition to being superheroic. Kayleigh also discussed the image's ability to support a narrative. Here Kayleigh states that:

Cable's posture in this image tells me that he's going to keep fighting, no matter how many limbs Apocalypse rips off. The fist, the clenched jaw, the slight rise off the ground – this man will not give up till the very end. And he's strong enough to power through a lot of pain. But Apocalypse is clearly in the dominant position here. We can see what he's done to Cable and he looks like he's only just getting started. As hard as Cable tries, this cover tells us that Apocalypse will be the eventual victor. (Kayleigh)

Kayleigh, like Megan, also makes note of Apocalypse's dominant position within the image, highlighting both his stature and power. Alongside this Kayleigh demonstrates her understanding of Cable's agency in continuing to fight when clearly outmatched. This indicates that within the narratives created by both Megan and Kayleigh that even if Cable is not "heroic enough to withstand and triumph" (Brown, 2002: 124), he will be heroic enough to sacrifice himself in battle. Furthermore, Kayleigh makes reference to Cable's strength in overcoming his injuries. This however will be discussed in more detail in the next section (see section 5.2.2).



## 5.2.2 Cable - Strength

In addressing the second theme, strength, this subsection will continue to explore strength as a visual indicator of superheroism. Strength here is understood as both physical strength as denoted by musculature and strength of character, which can be understood in this case as persistence or the overcoming of tangible obstacles such as an enemy or the social obstacles created through marginalisation. Physical strength as it is communicated visually through the depiction of musculature (Frederick et al, 2017; Bainbridge, 2009) is evidenced throughout the compositional interpretation where both characters are described in terms of their physicality. Cable for example is described as “*heavily muscled as is made evident by his form-fitting clothes*” (CI). Similarly, Apocalypse is described as “*heavily muscled with clear definition on his arms, back, and legs*” (CI).

Moving to focus on the facial expression, Cable is shown with, “*his teeth and jaw clenched, and his eyes are wide. He also has a vein protruding from his temple,*” (CI). As previously discussed, the baring of teeth is emblematic of aggression, once again suggesting that Cable is not submitting at this moment. Similarly, a protruding or bulging vein is “classified as an indexical signal of anger” (Shinohara and Matsunaka, 2009: 281). Alternatively, this could express pain, and be understood as representing the ways in which Cable is persisting.

Cable’s Strength is further exemplified throughout the participant data with participants referring to Cable as “strong enough to power through a lot of pain” (Kayleigh). Similarly, Katie described the scenes as follows:

The strength of Apocalypse and his overly muscled back (it's so muscly!!) as he looms over Cable is clear. I really like the definition of Cable's muscled arm

as he strains to get up and fight back. It definitely lets you know he's not going down easily. (Katie)

Here Kayleigh again highlights the link between the visible representation of musculature and strength (Frederick et al, 2017; Bainbridge, 2009). She also makes notes of Cable's strength in overcoming through his struggle to return to the fight. It is through this physical struggle that Cable is able to demonstrate his strength of character (Brown, 2002) and by extension his superheroism. The theme of strength as it manifests with regards to persistence and overcoming emerged from participants' discussions regarding how they would categorise Cable's death. Here all participants considered the death to be heroic. This can be seen in participant Kayleigh's response,

It seems pretty heroic to me – heroes losing battles against powerful enemies., I think that's Apocalypse killing Cable? Cable's a big guy but Apocalypse is massive. From the comics I've read, it takes quite a few people to take down Apocalypse. Cable on his own would never have stood a chance. But a valiant effort. (Kayleigh).

Here Kayleigh identifies Cable as a hero and delineates the heroic action that is battling and losing to powerful enemies. This further denotes agency and is representative of the action required to achieve a superheroic death, as discussed previously (See chapter four). Katie builds upon this understanding, suggesting that Cable's death here is dignified,

I suppose this sort of fits into the dignified space as Cable appears to be fighting even in the face of his insurmountable foe. Despite his injury he's still attempting to get up and face him again. There's also a thoughtfulness in the lack of gore or cheap scares which often adds to that undignified or disrespectful feeling. (Katie)

Katie, like Kayleigh, highlights that Cable is not only outmatched by his opponent but also that he is persevering despite both this and his injury. This again highlights Cable's superheroism and exemplifies how he is able to achieve a superheroic death by appealing to the "trope of the heroic last stand" (Loidl, 2010: 181). Katie goes on to discuss Cable's position as a disabled character stating:

That said I have complex feelings as Cable is a disabled character and this sees him "disarmed" pun intended with part of his accessibility aid ripped off. That feels undignified in a way, but also I doubt that much thought went into that aspect of this drawing. It also again to me doesn't feel final, or necessarily like a death. But in a sort of inverted experience of Megan, that may well be because I am just so overexposed to these characters and their seeming immortality that it's hard for me to worry about their fates. Especially in such a simple image where they're both still clearly alive (Katie).

In continuing to discuss her thoughts on Cable's death, Katie is also the first participant to identify Cable as disabled rather than just being a person who has a prosthetic arm. Within the Superhero genre Dolmage and Jacobs (2016) have identified two key narratives concerning the inclusion of disabled people. The first is the "simplified representation of disability as evil or as a possible sign of weakness" (2016: 16). The second, as demonstrated by Cable is that of the 'super-crip' (Alaniz, 2014; Dolmage and Jacobs, 2016; Grue, 2016), whose narratives mimic those found within other forms of 'inspiration porn' (Grue 2016; Pulrang, 2019; Shelton and Waddell, 2021 and demonstrate "the triumph of technology and willpower over physiological damage" (Grue, 2015: 843). Participants' failure to identify the link between Cable's arm and disability can be explained through Cheyne's (2021) application of McRuer's (2006) concept of "compulsory able-bodiedness." Applied to the superheroic body by Tankard (2022), compulsory able-bodiedness describes the process by which "disability is removed not by addressing social exclusion but by transforming or eliminating impaired bodies with technology" (2022:41). This

suggests that participants do not see the prosthetic as an accessibility aid for a man with a physical disability but rather as an improvement to an otherwise able body.

While other participants have made note of his prosthetic arm and its damage, its role as a prosthetic is overshadowed by its appearance. For example, while it is clearly mechanical, it looks as muscular and therefore as strong as his flesh arm. Katie also revisits ideas concerning the impermanence of death, which are considered in chapter four. Returning to the core concern of the type of death, Katie clarifies her earlier position in which she labelled Cable's death as dignified stating:

Regarding this question specifically, if this is a death it's definitely gonna be an agentic, "heroic", "dignified" one, but "good" would come from the larger context around the moment—who cares that cable dies, what are the consequences, what led up to the moment, etc. I also do not care about Cable so I'm gonna be a harder sell on "good" for this—I don't really care if he kicks it, haha. (Katie)

Here the importance of narrative in designating a death is once again raised (See chapter four), and in line with earlier assertions it becomes evident that while Katie does consider this death heroic, it does not meet the criteria for a narratively satisfying one. The broader understanding of what constitutes a superheroic death, that is one that occurs in the line of heroic action, is also invoked by participant Kayleigh who says,

If Cable dies fighting Apocalypse on his own, I think that'll qualify as a dignified demise. He's fighting really hard here and he's not giving up. That's heroic in my opinion. (Kayleigh)

Again, Cable's heroism is linked to his strength, and perseverance. However, Kayleigh also raised the impermanence of death and a perceived lack of stakes

within the genre as a factor that impacts her reception of this death. While she still considered the death to be heroic Kayleigh went on to say,

It doesn't feel like Cable is going to die here. Mainly because, he's kind of a big deal in the X-books so how can he die? Also, I've seen him knocking about in recent comics, so I know he's not dead. Does that make this battle less heroic? No. It's just that the stakes for Cable don't feel that high.  
(Kayleigh)

This again speaks to the idea of narrative satisfaction (see chapter four) as even if Cable were to die in this instance, his character has, according to Kayleigh, since been resurrected. The lack of consequences here functions to render the death meaningless to its audience. Additionally, this highlights the significance of a perceived narrative importance of a character in relation to the likelihood of their death even in instances in which the death has been confirmed. Kayleigh in this instance does not find the death unlikely because Cable is more capable than his opponent but because he is important narratively in the X-Men series and to remove him from that narrative lacks sense.

### 5.2.3 Old Man Logan - Action

Addressing the theme 'action' as it relates to the image featuring Logan (see fig.4) this subsection continues to explore the visual means through which heroism or heroic action is communicated. Here action is again linked to evidence of violence as it is represented through blood, injury and the presence of weapons. Evidenced in the first instance through the compositional interpretation, it is noted that,

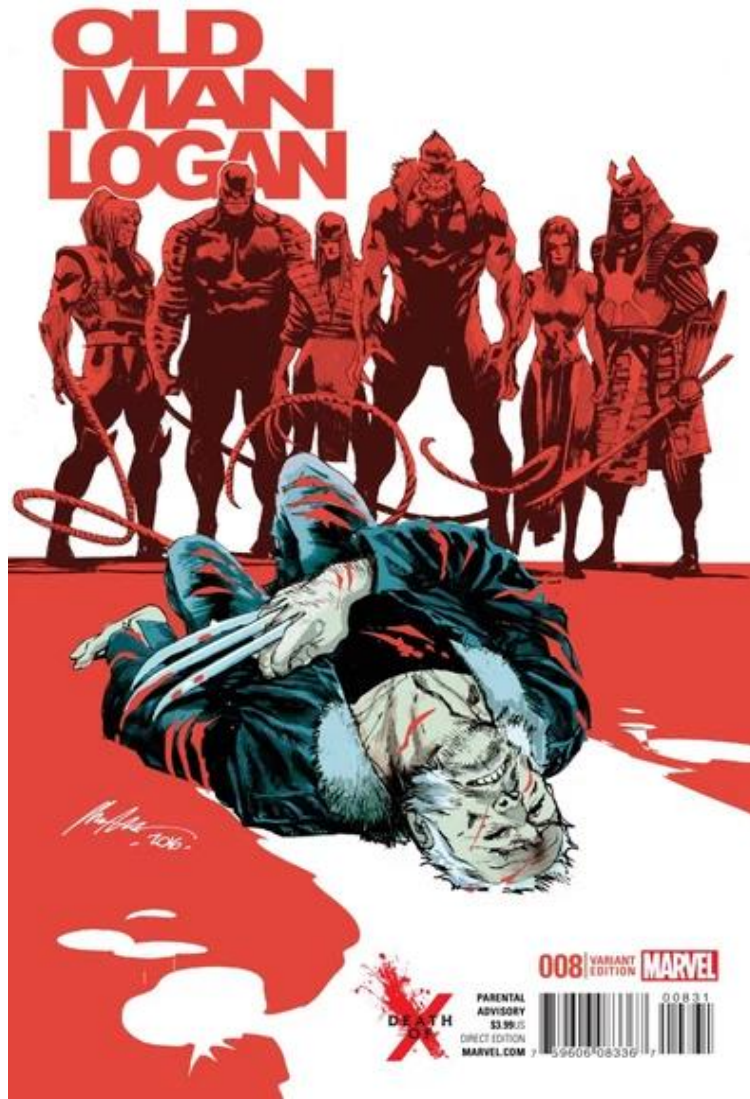


Fig. 4 – ‘Logan’ - Old Man Logan #8 variant by Rafael Albuquerque

*The image shows in the central foreground an older, white, man, laid on his back, angled diagonally with his head toward the bottom of the page. He has cuts to his face, neck, arms, chest, and legs. His posture or positioning is not tense and seems almost loose. His head is thrown back with his throat exposed. His eyes are closed, and his mouth is downturned showing the top row of his teeth. His right arm is across his chest, and his hand, which has 3 blades protruding from between his knuckles, is positioned in a loose fist. His left arm is down towards his side. His legs are bent at the knee. He is wearing jeans, a black t-shirt, and a jacket with a fur collar and has white short hair*

*and mutton chops. This is not traditional superhero attire and seems more like it would be the clothing of a civilian.*

*In the background, looking over him is a group of six people of various genders. The full details of their expressions and apparel are obscured by the style which has them rendered almost as silhouettes in red with black detailing. It is however clear that they are wearing outfits more in line with superhumans - form-fitting fabrics, helmets, and the contours of excessive bosoms and musculature are all visible. It is also clear that they are taking aggressive poses with their feet planted wide, fists clenched, and weapons drawn. They all appear to be looking directly at the figure on the ground however it is unclear if these are the characters enemies or teammates, (CI).*

Action here is most evident in the presence of blood and injury both of which suggest that violence has occurred. As previous discussions of the presence of blood (see section 5.2.1) have shown, blood is not only common within the genre (Lynch, 1991), it is indicative of a man's desire to demonstrate their heroic and by extension superheroic courage and bravery (McCracken, 2003). Furthermore, the presence of weapons, in this instance Logan's claws, indicate that prior to his defeat Logan was an active participant within this fight. Logan's agency within the scene is further referenced within the participant data. For example, participant Claire's response to the image. Here Claire states that:

As far as powers and abilities are concerned, we can see that Logan has his claws out, so it's obvious that he's been fighting. It's all very heroic--he's not passive. He's fought and he's lost but he tried his best. Logan has agency in his fight and his death. (Claire)

Claire's statement further highlights the presence of weapons as indicative of violence. Similarly, Claire notes that this violence is both heroic and representative of

agentic engagement. This again further demonstrates that the presence of violence is requisite in characterising superheroic action, (Bauer et al, 2017). This is further clarified in Rowen's response. Here Rowen calls attention to Logan's participation within the action that took place:

He has agency and looks like he put up a fight, like he fought back. The red not-quite-negative space mixes with the cuts on his body, which are clearly bleeding. He was outnumbered, based on the characters in the background, but he still fought for his life. It looks like maybe he'll pull through. Or maybe there's time for someone to swoop in to help. (Rowen)

Rowen also highlights that Logan was outnumbered but still appears to have fought. This further supports the argument that Logan's death here was the result of heroic action and can therefore be considered agentic and therefore heroic. Rowan however also presents a narrative in which Logan does not die. Here Rowan constructs a narrative in which Logan's death is rendered implausible due to his narrative importance.

#### 5.2.4 Old Man Logan - Strength

Moving to address the theme of strength as it pertains to Logan, this section further examines derivatized understandings of strength as an indicator of superheroism. Unlike the previous discussions within this chapter, strength here was not linked to Logan's physique. Rather strength was identified solely within participants' understanding of Logan's strength of character. As such, strength is associated with defiance, resistance, and sacrifice in spite of Logan's advanced age (Brown, 2021; Matek and Prtenjača, 2020) and perceived frailty. Logan's visibly advanced age is highlighted in the first instance within the compositional interpretation which describes him as an "*elderly man with white hair and mutton chops*" (C1). Brown (2021:700) argues that the recharacterisation of the former Wolverine to the Old Man



Logan persona demonstrates “a cultural anxiety about dominant, white, heterosexual masculinity losing its position as a hegemonic ideal.” This is due to the challenges that ageing poses to the hegemonic ideal which positions the vulnerabilities that accompany old age as counter-hegemonic and feminising (Matek and Prtenjača, 2020) However, much like Cable’s overcoming of his disability (see section 5.2.2), Logan’s superheroic sacrifice demonstrates that while he may no longer possess the strength of body expected of a superhero his strength of character remains. It is through this that Logan’s expression of masculinity while compromised by age is complicit to the hegemonic superheroic ideal as it strives to “solidify hegemonic masculinity as an ageless concept, and as a warning (...) that traditional markers of masculinity must never be compromised” (Brown, 2021: 700). Logan's strength is further exemplified within the interpretation through mention of the nature of his fight. Here Logan is described as “outnumbered” (CI) this demonstrates that even in a situation in which defeat is likely Logan had chosen to continue to fight thus demonstrating both his agency and strength of character.

Notable amongst the participant data is how strength, as defined above, is discussed most frequently with reference to Logan’s death and in opposition to an age-related frailty that has been identified by participants. This can be seen in the first instance in participant Jessie’s response. Jessie states that,

I’m getting heroic death vibes from this cover, but also a great deal of frailty. He looks like a man in pain, possibly alone or abandoned by his friends in the background, or sacrificing himself for the greater good. It’s heroic. I wouldn’t call it a good death, but it isn’t undignified. It isn’t passive. There was resistance. I’m guessing maybe he tried to face all of those people in the background by himself (how noble). Even being old I’m assuming he tried to fight off those 6 people. His claws are still out, literally and figuratively.  
(Jessie)

Here Jessie highlights that while she understands Logan's death as heroic and the scene as representative of active resistance his frailty does not go unnoticed. Thus, to fight in spite of this, suggests a strength that is not necessarily physical as would be represented through musculature but of spirit (Brown, 2002). This indicates that while strength remains important to the understanding of the hero as it is derived, how this strength is manifested can differ. Additionally, this allows for marginalised men to continue to establish complicity with the hegemonic ideal. Similar ideas are present in participant Claire's response,

I feel like this death for Logan is a release in a way--he's had this fight and lost, but at least he can die in peace now knowing he tried. But it doesn't completely fit my definition of freedom--Logan's fought a battle and lost. It's not a fulfilling death. Had he died after winning, that would have been better. But from the looks of it, that is not what happened here. Still the *Old Man Logan* cover gives Logan the dignity of dying a hero. It leans towards the "tragic hero death" pose, but the suffering in his grimace makes it feel less sanitised than other superhero deaths. Well, that and the bloody marks. There's an audience to his death, but he's experiencing it alone. The other characters are distant, almost showing respect, like mourners at a funeral. (Claire)

Claire goes on to talk in further detail about the death and how it speaks to dignity through defiance,

It looks like he's suffered, but fought back. That while he may have died, he went down fighting. I think that idea generally seems to imply dignity: "he didn't give up". His expression is grimacing, set in anger. There's a defiance there again. However, it feels like the artist, with the way he's shown laying far away from the other characters, is giving him a more dignified death. He's unbound and maybe he's dying rather than dead. The amount of injuries he's received seems to imply it took a huge amount of effort to get him to this

stage. It implies he was a powerful foe. Because he's a male character, he has to have those kinds of injuries to justify why he's dying. Even as an older man, Logan isn't allowed to be seen as too frail. (Claire)

This again functions to exemplify the strength that Logan has exhibited, in fighting back regardless of his age. Claire also notes the positioning of the other characters within the image likening them to mourners. This assigns a further measure of dignity to the death and validates both the superheroic action and strength that led to Logan's death. Moreover, Claire makes note of how many injuries are required to justify the death of a male character. Here it is not enough to simply tell the audience that a character is dead, it must be demonstrated through visible injury - Logan did not simply die, rather he fell in battle, outnumbered, a hero. Additionally, Claire highlights Logan's frailty, and how this is not something that can be allowed to dominate his character. Rather frailty here exists to be overcome, it is an obstacle that when subdued, functions to further demonstrate strength.

Conversely, participant Jessie understands the presence of injury as indicative of frailty. Additionally, Jessie draws attention to how old age, as an axis of marginalisation affects the composition of the image and the positioning of Logan within it, stating,

If I didn't know this was Old Man Logan, I would think this hero was frail because of the wounds inflicted on him. Having seen that it is an elderly character, I'm now wondering whether this cover isn't a tad bit ageist. Would a younger male character be positioned in this way? Or would they be poised in a more heroic position? (Jessie)

Through engaging with the themes of action and strength as they have emerged from the data and relate to images that featured heroes who exhibit marginalised forms of masculinity, it can be argued that the marginalisation's of age and disability

do not prevent men from achieving heroic deaths. Rather, these marginalisation's provide additional opportunities for heroes to demonstrate a strength that is internal rather than physical. Additionally, it has become further evident that in the absence of narrative participants will construct their own using elements from within the image in order to create meaning and understanding (Kukkonen, 2013). These findings will continue to be developed and expanded upon in the next section as it engages with the theme 'uncertainty' as it aligns with visual representations of death that feature superheroes whose expression of masculinity aligns with subordinate or deviant forms (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

### 5.3 Deviant Heroic Masculinity

In order to further demonstrate the ways in which participants understand visual representations of death this section will continue to engage with the themes as they emerge from the data. Unlike previous sections which centred the emergent themes action and strength this section will address a singular theme identified as 'uncertainty' as it relates to the deaths of heroes whose expression of masculinity aligns with subordinate or deviant forms. Constructed in relation to hegemonic masculinity, deviant masculinities are characterised through the embodiment of subordinate elements that are otherwise negated by hegemonic masculinity, that is "black, non-western, irrational, effeminate, and non violent" (Demitrious, 2001: 347). Furthermore, through their dissociation from the hegemonic ideal deviant masculinities are broadly "seen to orient towards femininity and feminisation" (Iveson and Formato, 2022: no pagination). Within this section deviant masculinities will be exemplified by Thunderbird (fig. 5) due to his race, and Nightcrawler (fig. 6) due to his proximity to femininity. Here 'uncertainty' highlights the uncertainty participants felt while trying to understand the images presented to them due to the absence of the markers of the derivatized exemplar of hegemonic superheroic masculinity demonstrated in previous section via the themes action and strength. The theme of uncertainty will be addressed first with relation to Thunderbird (fig. 5) and then Nightcrawler (fig. 6).

### 5.3.1 Thunderbird - Uncertainty

Addressing the theme 'uncertainty', as it pertains to the image featuring Thunderbird (see fig. 5), this section engages with the data as it relates to deviant heroic masculinities and visual representations of death. Thunderbird's expression of masculinity can be understood as deviant due to his race because as argued by Innes and Anderson (2015:11) "hegemonic masculinity functions to subordinate indigenous masculinities" and make them complicit in "reinforcing the legacy of colonial subordination." Unlike the Complicit masculinities discussed in section 5.2, deviant masculinities are not afforded the opportunity to overcome their subordination instead they become "subject to a projected patriarchal hegemonic authority that seeks to reinforce both a gender and race-informed hierarchy that asserts white male dominance" (Sneider, 2015:70). Uncertainty in this instance relates to contextual concerns that hindered participants ability to understand the image and by extension led to an inability to ascribe Thunderbirds actions to superheroism. Referring to the compositional interpretation in the first instance it is evident that while there are elements from which a narrative could be inferred the ambiguity regarding the context of this narrative could lead to uncertainty. For example:



*Fig. 5 – ‘Thunderbird’ - New Avengers #13 variant by Jeffrey Veregge*

*The image shows, in the lower half of the frame, a Native American man engaging a large red bird that is positioned in the upper half of the image. The man wears a grey, sleeveless superhero costume with a brown utility belt, domino mask, black military-style boots and gloves. While noticeably abstract in style the man is depicted as slim but muscular. He is armed with a tactical bowie knife in his left hand, however this is angled away from the bird not toward it and he is holding onto the bird's beak with his right hand. The bird has its wings spread and its talons wrapped around the man's midriff and right leg. Its beak is open and it has a long thin white tongue protruding. Its eyes are large and hooded with pointed eyebrows (CI).*

While one could argue that their position in opposition is enough to suggest conflict, the source of and reason for the antagonism is difficult to discern. Additionally, there is no sign of injury and while the man is armed, the knife is held away from the bird and does not appear to be drawn against it. Furthermore, while the man does appear muscular he does not have the exaggerated muscles (Taylor, 2007) of his counterparts. While these details can be compounded to describe what is happening in the image, they do not provide suitable information to determine why this might be happening or what the eventual consequences might be. Similar ambivalent responses were identified within participant data, although notably there was no mention of Thunderbird's race. Participant Megan, for example, stated that:

Honestly, I don't really have like... any narrative feelings about the image at all. I don't know what's going on, I don't know the context, I don't even really know who's winning based on this image alone—our hero here might be about to get dropped to their death, or they might be about to stab the bird. I can't tell! I think in that vein, it makes me think it's *probably* gonna be a "bad" (narratively unimpactful) death—without the context of knowing the character, the image isn't evoking a sense of emotional weight or even real suspense, so I don't think I'd care (or experience catharsis or anguish) if either character died. (Megan)

Here, Megan identifies her inability to discern how Thunderbird will die. The interactions between the depicted characters are unclear, and as a result Megan has positioned this death as lacking narrative impact. This lack of narrative impact was previously found (see chapter four) to be most frequently connected to the deaths of women whose deaths were found to be largely incidental rather than central to the narrative in which they were contained. This is indicative of the process of othering that allows for the construction of deviant masculinities as aligned with femininity and subordinate to the hegemonic masculine ideal (Innes and Anderson, 2015). This was further supported by participant Katie who said,

I agree!! This doesn't give me a sense of danger or death. To me it feels more of a metaphorical struggle than a death or end. It feels more like an abstract inspired art piece than a representation of death or danger to me. I think that's the most interesting thing about this image. It seems to me to be conveying an internal battle, Thunderbird vs Thunderbird and a battle between oneself rather than an external attack that could damage him. I also think the placement of the facial markings is interesting as it makes him look like he's crying. It doesn't feel like it's meant to make him seem weak but more to show sadness or desperation about the situation he's in. Maybe a lack of agency but more in that aforementioned battle with himself. (Katie)

Additionally, Katie links the facial markings present within the image to tears which she attributes not to weakness but frustration. However, the demonstration of emotions such as sadness or fear is largely precluded within the hegemonic masculine framework as it is considered indicative of a “reduced masculine standing” (River and Flood, 2021: 910). As such this serves to further highlight Thunderbird’s deviance from the hegemonic masculine ideal and impede his ability to access a superheroic death. Furthermore, in highlighting both a lack of clear heroic action, and agency, Katie’s analysis indicates that this death cannot be categorised as superheroic as it fails to meet the criteria (see chapter four). Megan also made note of the facial markings resembling tears, saying, “I was also gonna comment about the facial markings looking like tears! I think that’s my favorite thing about this image, and boy I hope it was intentional haha,” (Megan), however she goes on to say that,

As much as I like the papercut stylization here in concept, the image just doesn’t feel... successful to me—I don’t know anything about the character, so the thunderbird vs thunderbird meaning is *totally* lost on me and it just feels like a sort of static representation of an airborne fight. There’s not enough movement in the single image to tell me what happened immediately before or imply what will happen immediately after, which makes it really difficult for



me to tell if this struggle is futile, or defiant, or triumphant, or... anything  
(Megan)

Here the ambiguity within the image is again leading to a lack of clarity in participant understanding. As such Megan is unable to discern what is happening or what the outcome will be. While death is ostensibly guaranteed (by virtue of its presence in the collection, titled Death of X), the circumstances of that death are not as such Megan is unable to ascertain whether Thunderbird is active or passive within the scene, and is, therefore, unable to attribute agency to his actions. This was further supported in conversation by Katie who said:

I totally agree it feels very much like a singular image, not really even a moment, just an image that doesn't speak to (like Megan said) anything unless you specifically know who the character is and what its fighting. Also the vagueness of the image to me kind of speaks to a vagueness of intention from the artist. Maybe they just thought it looked cool haha. (Katie)

Conversely, Kayleigh did feel as though there was a clear narrative that indicated “a fierce but futile battle”. However, she went on to say that,

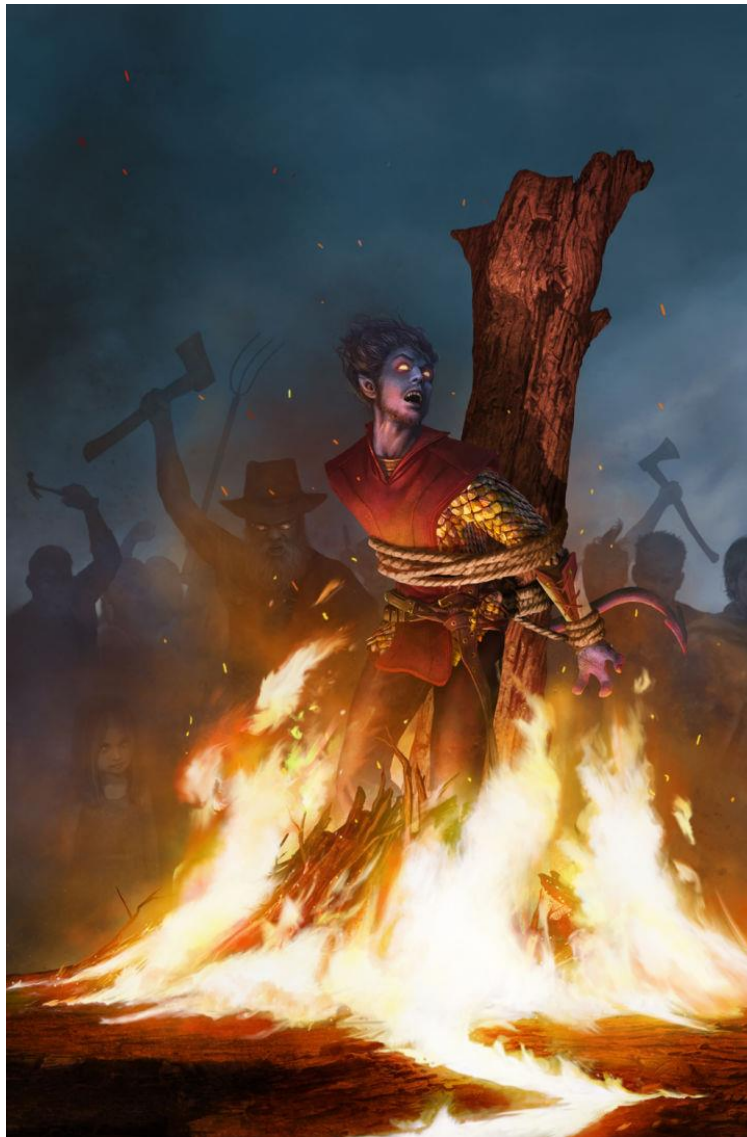
As the others have mentioned, it doesn't look like he has much agency here. He's being attacked and he's losing. I'm going to be contrarian here and say I feel a sense of impending doom for Thunderbird. It just seems like such a large bird to me, whether it's real or an internal struggle, Thunderbird's not going to come out of this alive. It does look like Thunderbird's falling to his death, and that it might kill him faster than the bird will. Without any other context to this story, that feels like an undignified death to me. He was killed while in battle with the bird, that would give Thunderbird some agency. But falling to one's death? You can't fight gravity (and win), so that feels like an unfortunate way for a hero to go. (Kayleigh)

Additionally, Kayleigh suggests that this death is both undignified and lacking agency, features more commonly associated with contemporary conceptions of the 'bad' death (Howarth, 2006; LeBaron et al, 2015; Corpora, 2022). While dignity in death is not a prerequisite of a superheroic death, agency represents a key component of its designation, its absence in this case therefore serves to position Thunderbird's death as unheroic. Thunderbird in this instance has not been afforded the dignity of a superheroic death as falling to his death aligns most closely with a sudden or accidental death rather than the sacrificial last stand that would be expected.

### 5.3.2 Nightcrawler - Uncertainty

Moving to address the theme 'uncertainty' as it relates to the image featuring Nightcrawler (see fig. 6), this subsection further explores the data as it relates to deviant heroic masculinities and visual representations of death. Here Nightcrawler's expression of masculinity is understood as deviant due to his proximity to femininity (Demitrious, 2001, Iveson and Formato, 2022) as demonstrated through his appearance and passivity. 'Uncertainty' as it relates to Nightcrawler relates to blurring on gender roles that emphasise his proximity to femininity and therefore function to preclude him from attaining a superheroic death. Notably, participants in this instance were highly knowledgeable regarding Nightcrawler's characters and history and this has informed their understanding. Beginning with the compositional interpretation, the image is described as follows:

*The image shows a man, Nightcrawler, being burnt at the stake in front of an angry mob armed with axes, pitchforks, and in one instance, a hammer. Nightcrawler does not appear to be human and has blue skin, pointed ears and teeth, three fingered hands and a pointed tail. He is wearing gold scalemail covered by a red tabard tunic, white and gold bracers, black close fitting trousers, and he has a sword hanging from his belt. (CI)*



*Fig. 6 – ‘Nightcrawler’ - Daredevil #9 variant by Rahzzah*

A number of anachronisms can be identified within the image, burning at the stake for example is not a contemporary means of execution and is uncommon in contemporary superhero comics. Burning at the stake, however, does represent a feminised manner of dying. Positioned within the popular imagination as the means of executing witches (Roper, 2012) and sexually deviant women (McDougal, 2022) in the Middle Ages, burning at the stake is ingrained within the cultural landscape as a method of dying reserved specifically for women. This therefore serves to demonstrate that Nightcrawler's proximity to femininity rather than the masculinity

expected of a superhero (Cocca, 2014) is reinforced via his death. The costuming also speaks to a different era and would be more appropriate to another genre of fiction as it is not identifiable as a superheroic attire. By representing Nightcrawler without his costume, the image further distances him from his superheroic persona. Additionally, as highlighted by Plotz (2023) the superhero's costume serves a key role in the representation of superheroic masculinity as “it highlights the muscularity of the body and at the same time draws attention to the body’s actions, to how these muscles are engaged” (Plotz, 2023:3). Here Nightcrawler’s costume does not function to emphasise his masculinity through the display of musculature, but rather it obscures his body and foregrounds his slight stature thus further aligning him with femininity. Rather than a recognisable superpowered opponent or enemy, Nightcrawler’s death comes at the hands of a mob. The mob in this instance can be described as follows,

*The mob is predominantly out of focus and rendered by silhouettes. Two members of the mob however are more distinct. The first is a man to the Nightcrawlers' right, noticeable as he is making direct eye contact with the viewer. He is holding an axe aloft and is wearing a hat, and vest. He has an angry expression with a full beard and glowing eyes. Next to him is a small girl, looking up at the Nightcrawler (CI).*

While the image presents a clear opposition between Nightcrawler and the mob, the relationship or reason for the antagonism is unclear. However, the presence of a mob rather than a villain suggests that Nightcrawler has not been apprehended during the course of superheroic action but has been targeted for some manner of perceived deviance, most likely his demonic appearance. Furthermore, Nightcrawler's lack of visible injury suggests that he has chosen not to resist but rather has elected to relinquish his power at this moment. The inclination to relinquish power and control when faced by an armed mob is supported by Bettache and Chiu (2018:105) who found that “the presence of physical threat primes people to willingly relinquish personal agency to lubricate social coordination”. That is to say that in circumstances such as those represented within the image, people are more

likely to relinquish their agency as they believe it will increase the chance of positive outcomes. While this has not been the case, Nightcrawler's seemingly pacifist solution to this altercation further serves to position his masculinity as deviant (Demitrious, 2001) and demonstrate his proximity to femininity. Additionally, by electing to relinquish his agency Nightcrawler further precludes himself from achieving a superheroic death.

Participant data highlighted the spectacular nature of Nightcrawler's death, making note of its focus on his suffering. Sarah, for example stated,

I have an immediate gut reaction because- that's Nightcrawler, right? But with Nightcrawler, even though this image feels relevant to his larger narrative, I don't like it. I think there are plenty of ways to talk about death in mutant stories, and to talk about the way mutantphobia factors in, but I look at that and don't know why anyone would want to see this as a comic cover. It feels to me like it's dramatizing Kurt's suffering, putting the focus on how he's being murdered, with the mob out of focus, but him and the stake he's being burned at right in the forefront. Maybe I'm biased because I'm a big Nightcrawler fan though, to be honest. (Sarah)

Here Sarah likens this death to murder and highlights its potential links to mutantphobia, the in-universe bigotry faced by mutants; this echoes the bigotry faced by real men whose expression of masculinity is similarly classed as deviant (Brescoll et al, 2012) at the hands of lynch mobs (Hobbs, 2016: Stevenson, 2021). Additionally, Sarah highlights the spectacular nature of suffering within this image. Writing on the spectacle of the 'necessary suffering' of punishment in prison, Pugliese (2008:217) notes the spectacles of suffering act as "object lessons of deterrence" to those who would engage in similar crimes. When applied to the image, it follows that Nightcrawler's suffering would similarly deter others from similar expressions of deviancy. While Jane may believe that "Kurt is a character destined to suffer!" (Jane), the use of suffering here suggests not only the presence of, but the

exploitation of vulnerabilities that Nightcrawler is not able to overcome, something that would be expected of him in his position of hero (Matek and Prtenjača, 2020). Participant Casey also thinks that image lacks agency, stating,

I think Nightcrawler looks totally devoid of agency here, but like in a “railroad tycoon has tied me to the tracks” way - like I’d expect the narrative to rescue him even though he wouldn’t rescue himself. (Casey)

Here Casey calls to mind a second feminised form of death, that of the cinematic damsel tied to the tracks (Grundhauser, 2017). Burning at the stake is of course the first instance due to its association within the public imagination with witches and by extension women (Roper, 2012). Thus, linking Nightcrawler's passivity and associated lack of agency to his feminisation. Additionally, by suggesting that he looks like he is waiting to be rescued as he will not rescue himself mirrors the dominant portrayals of women found within early comics who were similarly represented as in need of rescue (Beerman, 2015) and functions to further align Nightcrawler with femininity. These links to femininity can be understood as functioning to position Nightcrawler as passive and therefore as lacking agency which in turn serves to negate his ability to access the superheroic death. Sarah makes further reference to Nightcrawlers lack of agency, stating,

The Nightcrawler cover absolutely feels to me like Kurt's in a position without agency, while the nearly faceless mob, even though you can't recognize them or see most of their faces, has all the agency. It definitely communicates a lot to me about Kurt's religious background and history of being feared for being demonic in appearance. Re: definitions of death, it feels to me like death for the sake of being sensational, like a character death intended entirely to rile up the audience and garner a response. (Sarah)

Here Sarah also makes note of Nightcrawler's history with religion. Notably Nightcrawler is a devout Catholic. This brings an alternative perspective to the means of death suggesting that while it may not be clear contextually, it is thematically appropriate for this character as being burned was the punishment for heresy during the Middle Ages (Cavill, 2014). As this punishment later was extended to include "sorcerers, sorceresses, apostates" and "sodomites" (Cavill, 2014: 274), it can be argued that although this punishment was not gender specific it was targeted at women and men who failed to meet the hegemonic masculine expectations of the time. This furthers the argument that this manner of death is aligned with deviancy as it pertains to gender roles and the normative expectations attached to them. Sarah also highlights the sensational nature of the death, noting that it serves little function beyond the audience response. Audience response was discussed previously (see section 4.1.2) and was found to be a key factor among the deaths of women, particularly those whose deaths lacked narrative centrality. While this does not suggest feminisation as such, it does suggest that the manner of Nightcrawler's death is aligned with the kinds of death one would expect to befall a female character, both with regards to the manner and the associated relinquishment of agency. One could therefore argue that this death not only serves to situate Nightcrawler closer to femininity than masculinity but removes his capacity to achieve a superheroic death.

In contrast, Jane does feel that the image conveys a sense of agency positioning Nightcrawler as defiant. Jane goes on to describe the death as thematically relevant, comparing it to a martyrdom, which again links Nightcrawler's religious background. However, Jane goes on to note that this martyrdom is not the equivalent of a superheroic act or death, rather it is a punishment for his appearance. Jane states that,

I think Kurt here has some agency. He's defiant here, and in focus, despite his martyred position, and I mean that more in the religious sense rather than the casual use -- he's not necessarily dying for a greater, noble sacrifice in-narrative, like a friend or to stop Magneto. He's being killed for, presumably, a

conflation of his demonic appearance/mutant status, not for the greater cause. And I think martyrdom is the way Kurt has to go out, ~thematically, so while it's not teaching me much about the character I think it fits and would be a "good" death for him. Not sure why he's in like, the Pilgrim era though. (Jane)

Here in raising the idea of a 'good death' (Kellehear, 2007; Howarth, 2006) Jane highlights previous arguments made within this thesis (see section 4.3.2) regarding the narratively satisfying death, however the manner of death does not allow for further categorisation as superheroic. Jane also notes the incongruous setting of the image. From the data it can be seen that while Jane suggests that this may be the "pilgrim era" she is unsure of the true setting or its relevance. Sarah continues to discuss the context of the image as it relates to a previous instance in Nightcrawler's history. Here Sarah provides an example in which she considers Nightcrawler is martyred as a result of his superheroic efforts,

I think it's also interesting to think about this cover in the context of Kurt's death in Uncanny X-Men back in 2009 or so? Where that death was absolutely, in my opinion, framed as martyrdom, in that he sacrificed his life for Hope, the "mutant messiah." Because, to me, that felt like a death with agency- Kurt made decisions, and was willing to die so Hope wouldn't. Whereas this image, while it uses the visual imagery of martyrdom, is so removed from any narrative context whatsoever, it feels more like tragedy porn to me than anything else. Kurt's suffering so someone can pay \$3.99 for a variant cover of Kurt being burned at the stake- not because his death achieves anything or saves anyone. (Sarah)

Sarah again refers to suffering, which suggests vulnerability, and indicates Nightcrawler's lack of agency. Sarah also highlights the futility of this death, it neither serves to position Nightcrawler as a superhero by providing the narrative context to suggest a heroic last stand nor function beyond its role in provoking an audience response. This can be understood as reinforcing previous arguments regarding



audience response and the deaths of women (see section 4.1.2) and thus subjecting Nightcrawler to a feminisation in death that serves to reinforce his deviant standing whilst further reducing his masculine status. Sarah also notes the way this cover seeks to use Nightcrawler's suffering and, by extension, death as a means for promotion. This can be understood in line with the broader commercialisation of death, a phenomenon that serves as a constitutive factor in the contemporary spectacular death (Jacobson, 2020). The commercialisation of death, that is the construction of death as "a marketable commodity used (...) to attract attention, to sell products and to provoke our curiosity" (Jacobson, 2020:6) functions to position death as "a product or consumer item that may increase sales or as a spectacle intended to create hype and attention from a paying audience" (Jacobson, 2020: 8). Sarah continues to disparage the commodification of death as a means to promote comic books, further highlighting the link between spectacle and consumption explicated by Jacobson (2020), stating,

The entire concept of these variants feels very weird to me, personally. (re: death covers), to put Nightcrawler into a victim role, turning death into a pin-up. The cover feels to me like it's just making death into a spectacle to be consumed. I want the 'shocking' thing to be led up to and to have a context. I guess my big issue with this is the status as a variant strips it of narrative, and therefore it reads like the huge shocking twist, but without any buildup, or resolution. (Sarah)

Here Sarah positions Nightcrawler as a victim. It has been found that men "struggle to reconcile being a "victim" with being a man" (Dunn, 2012: 3443) as the term is conceived of as a gendered label that alludes to passivity and vulnerability and reinforces the shame of victimisation (Dunn, 2012). This suggests that while the term does not serve to feminise, it can be understood as a feminising label. Similarly, referring to death as it relates to Nightcrawler as a 'pin-up', a term most frequently used to describe erotic images of women, suggests a feminisation. Additionally, while gender was not a key area for discussion amongst the group, participant Jane raised that,

We didn't really go into the gendered dynamics here, but Kurt certainly felt more vulnerable here and I think he's often allowed to be that way as a more "romantic" character -- but he's still not sexualized here like I think a woman would be. (Jane)

In situating Nightcrawler as a romantic character, particularly as it relates to his vulnerability, Sarah further highlights Nightcrawler's departure from the hegemonic masculine ideal. Expressions of vulnerability are discouraged by hegemonic masculinity (Cleary, 2012). Sarah also highlights his romantic characterisation, which further demonstrates his emotional vulnerability but notes that this does not lead to him being treated like a woman. This suggests that while Nightcrawler has been subject to feminization, he has not been subject to objectification or sexualisation. One could argue that this lack of objectification is due to the presence of a presumed male audience who are themselves seeking the proximity to a hegemonic masculine ideal. Within a framework in which homosexuality is considered deviant and therefore subordinate to the hegemonic ideal, the objectification of men would lead to further deviance resulting in a loss of status, particularly within a genre that positioned its male leads as largely asexual (Cocca, 2014).

By engaging with the theme 'uncertainty' as it relates to death this section argues that heroes whose masculinity can be understood as deviant are broadly prevented from achieving a heroic death. Rather, death functions to reinforce their deviant status through the suggestion of a deficit that cannot be overcome, unlike those exhibited by the complicit marginalised masculinities. This in turn leads to a loss or relinquishment of agency, which prevents these characters from being seen to be acting heroically. For example, Thunderbird is understood to be dying as the result of falling not from the physical altercation itself, whereas Nightcrawler's death functions to feminise him and thus demonstrate his deviance.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Having engaged with the themes as they emerged from the data, this chapter argues that male superhero deaths are broadly understood as superheroic, that is to say that they meet the criteria for a superheroic death as outlined in Chapter Four. Additionally, this chapter argues that participants will construct narratives to explain what they believe is happening within an image, however even when death is confirmed these narratives tend towards victory rather than defeat. Furthermore, this chapter argues that while the hegemonic heroic ideal prioritises heavy musculature or physical strength to visually denote a heroic figure, this can be substituted for moral or internal strength to position marginalised masculinities as complicit to hegemonic masculinity. This is identified by participants as persistence or courage in overcoming. However, this is not the case for subordinate or deviant masculinities. These deaths were broadly considered undignified and lacking in agency. This precludes them from being categorised as superheroic. This chapter therefore demonstrates how death is used to affirm and assert the dominant position of heroic hegemonic masculinities by only affording a heroic death to characters who either exhibit hegemonic masculinity or can be understood as complicit.

Building upon these findings, specifically those concerning the role of narrative and gender, chapter six, *Superheroes, Femininity, and Death*, will further examine what visual representations of death can communicate about gender. Focusing on visual representations via the in-depth analysis of comic book covers and participant data, this chapter will continue to explore emergent themes regarding gender, heroism, and death.

# Chapter Six: Superheroes, Femininity, and Death

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the deaths of male characters are used to affirm and assert the dominant position of heroic hegemonic masculinities. This is achieved by only affording a heroic death to characters who either exhibit hegemonic masculinity, or whose expression of masculinity can be understood as complicit. Those male characters who exhibited marginalised forms of masculinity, or whose expression of masculinity was more closely aligned with femininity were more likely to be viewed as submissive, and their deaths as unheroic. Building upon these findings and sitting parallel, this chapter will examine visual representations of the deaths of female superheroes in response to the following research questions:

I. Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?

II. How do gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?

This chapter will reveal and argue that the deaths of female superheroes are characterised by objectification. The significant result of this characterisation is that the female death is more likely to be understood as unheroic relative to their male counterparts, and those that are understood as heroic are perceived negatively.

The core chapter wide theme that emerged from the data, 'objectification' will be explored in line with four sub themes - vanquished, relinquished, defiant, and heroic - all of which will engage with visual representations of the deaths of female superheroes through a compositional interpretation and participant data via thematic

analysis. These sub-themes which can be understood as discrete conceptualisations that exemplify this objectification as it aligns with visual markers of subordination, passivity, resistance, and heroism and relates to the deaths of female superheroes. Here section one, will address the sub theme 'vanquished'. This will examine the ways in which female characters are portrayed as being subdued completely in death so as to render them as passive, thus reinforcing their objectification while simultaneously removing their agency and therefore positioning them as unworthy of a superheroic death. Section two will address the sub theme 'relinquished'. This section will address how female characters are represented as relinquishing their agency, yielding to their death rather than dying as the result of superheroic action. Section three will address the sub theme 'defiance' and building upon the previous sections, will demonstrate that rather than evidencing heroism, subjugation met with defiance is utilised, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, to exemplify weakness. This is because ultimately the defiance is understood to be futile and positions women as less physically capable than their male counterparts and, as such, this serves to further situate them as unheroic. In contrast, section four will engage with the sub theme 'heroic'. This section will examine how heroic deaths, when afforded to female characters, are devalued through objectification and positioned as less worthy than those of their male counterparts.

Prior to addressing these themes, this chapter will present a brief overview of the literature as it pertains to superheroes, femininity, and death and their imaginaries in the male gaze. Additionally, while the thesis will not provide detailed outlines of each character's history, further insight may be necessary at times in order to bring further clarity to the reader with regards to participant data. As with the previous chapter, participants here are broadly engaged with comic book culture, but may not be familiar with every character they encountered within the focus group setting. Furthermore, those who were familiar exhibited differing levels of prior engagement and knowledge.

## 6.1 Vanquished

As evidenced previously, (see chapters two and four), gender represents a key consideration within the study of comic books due to its importance as a signifier within the medium (Bongco, 1999, Baker and Raney, 2007). Unlike representations of men which serve to “celebrate masculinity” (Chute, 2007: 278), women are still predominantly represented in ways that “fetishise the female body to an almost pornographic level” (Brown, 2015: 184). Rather than celebrating femininity, these representations function to “circulate, reinforce, and/or construct stereotypes of men as active and heroic subjects and women (or just parts of women) as objects valued for their sex appeal” (Cocca, 2014: 412). Sexual objectification (LeMoncheck, 1985; Nussbaum, 1995; Langton, 2009), that is actions or beliefs that reduce a woman’s status to that of a sexual object, serves to remove agency and position them as passive, submissive, or compliant. This is further explicated by Jackson and Scott (2001) who argue that “for women, a gendered body often means a sexualised body, a body disciplined into a sexually ‘attractive appearance’ and demeanour” (Jackson and Scott, 2001: 15). Here “the sexualised body” is also the “passive body” (2001: 15). This is equally true of female superheroes who continue to be defined by their passivity (Seiter, 1993; Baker and Raney, 2007; De Dauw, 2021).

The female body as it is represented in death is similarly subject to objectification and eroticization (Foltyn, 2008, 2010; May, 2009) with its passivity further evidenced in Foltyn’s (2010) ‘corpse chic’. Corpse chic highlights the use of the corpse, usually a woman, and the “performance of death” within mainstream fashion imagery. Here women “pose as cadavers... glamoris[ing] the freshly or decomposing ‘dead; body, transforming the alluring living body into an alluring ‘dead’ one” (2010: no pagination). Rather than subjects of passive deaths, these images position women as victims of violence, thus demonstrating a preference for imagery in which women have “suffered a heinous ‘death’ at the hands of a murderer, serial killer, sexual sadist, paedophile, animal, or even a demented toy” (2010: no pagination). The desire to inspect the female body, made passive in death is explicated by May’s (2009) necro-gaze. A synthesis of the morbid gazes (Pierson, 2010; Penfold-Mounce, 2016) and Mulvey’s (2009) male gaze, May (2009) posits that “corpses are inscribed not just as inert flesh and tissue, but as malleable, feminine, pleasure providing and privilege affirming - as meant-to-be-opened beneath an inquisitive

male gaze” (2009: 167). As such, the necro-gaze is “meant to succinctly parcel together the erotic power and privilege differentials of a set of interaction with the dead” (2009: 169-70).

The concepts of corpse chic (Foltyn, 2010) and necro-gaze (May, 2009) can be utilised to better understand the superheroic death as it is, or is not, afforded to female superheroes. If the female superhero is understood to be a passive object valued only for their sex appeal, as suggested above and within the broader literature review (see chapter two), it follows that the deaths of female superheroes must also prioritise sexualisation and passivity. This in turn serves to problematize the concept of the superheroic death as it pertains to women particularly as the superheroic death functions to uphold a superheroic hegemonic ideal that prioritises agentic action as evidenced through violence and strength over submission and passivity (Brown, 2022). Across the data, ‘objectification’ emerged as an integral theme that describes the relationship between the female superheroic death and cultural views of power and agency. Objectification here refers to the sexualisation of female characters through pose, gesture, facial expression, and dress as it serves to remove agency through the positioning of female superheroes as passive, sexual objects rather than active subjects (Cikara et al, 2011). Within this section objectification will be discussed in reference to its relationship with visual displays of modes of passivity via the sub theme ‘vanquished’. This sub theme describes how female superheroes can be situated as having been overcome entirely by their aggressors. These superheroes are therefore portrayed as passive in death and are often positioned as though they are sleeping. Thus, there is a prioritisation of beauty through a lack of visible injury, bloodshed, or damage to their person or belongings (for example, their outfit) and allows for objectification to continue postmortem. Overall, this sub theme suggests that these superheroes have not fought back or have demonstrated a passivity as such as to be subdued completely.

Unlike the previous chapters (see chapters four and five), both the core integral theme of objectification and the sub theme vanquished will be discussed in tandem rather than separately as they function as compounding factors rather than discrete

aspects. That is to say that Storm's position as vanquished is fundamentally linked to her objectification and that together they serve to reinforce the removal of agency that in turn leads to female superheroes being positioned as unable to achieve a superheroic death.

### 6.1.1 Storm - Vanquished

In addressing the sub theme vanquished, as it is evidenced within the compositional interpretation and participant data, it is argued that representations of the female superhero as subdued completely serves to situate them as passive rather than an active subject, thus reinforcing their objectification. This is achieved through the prioritisation of beauty over evidence of agentic heroic action as is it represented in terms of injury and active engagement with a scene or scenario, which leads to the further objectification of female superheroes, rendering them as non-agentic, passive, sex objects, unable to achieve a superheroic death as theorised in chapter four. References to Storm's position as vanquished as it relates to and compounds her objectification can be found in the first instance within the compositional interpretation. Here the image featuring Storm (fig. 7) is described as follows:



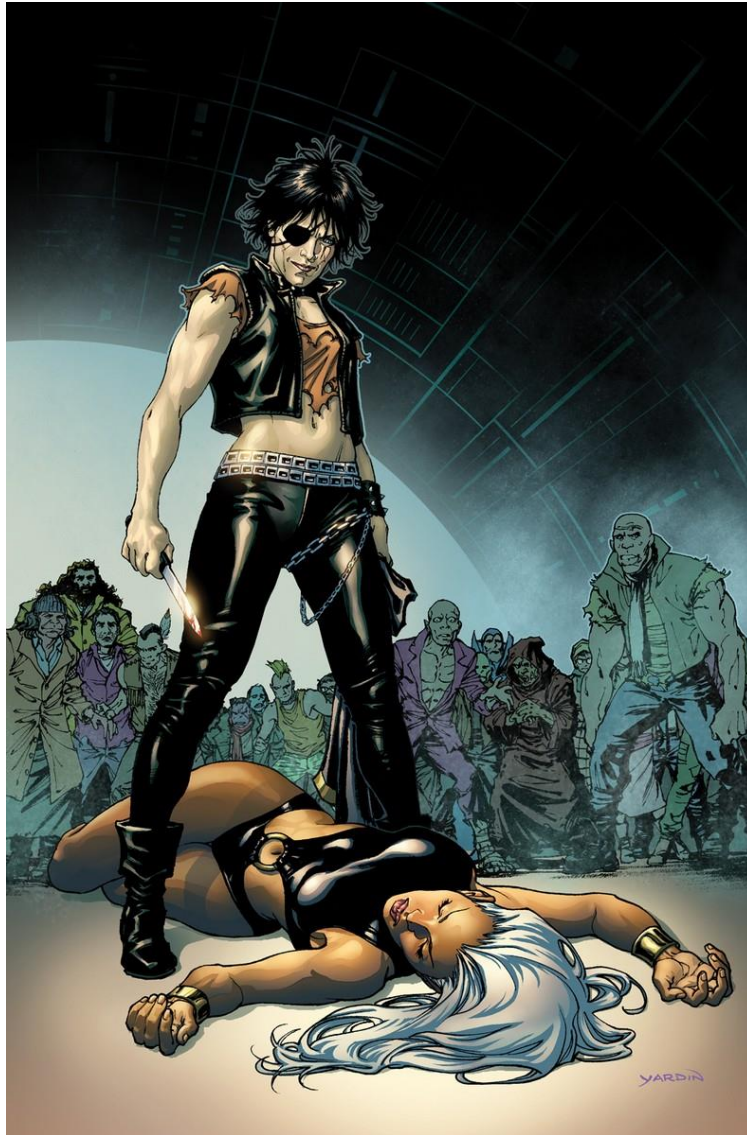


Fig. 7 – ‘Storm’ - Black Panther #4 variant by David Yardin

*Standing centrally is Callisto, a slim, muscular, white woman. She is standing tall with her shoulders back and her chin angled down in order to direct her gaze toward Storm who is positioned lying prone below her. Callisto’s parted legs create a frame for viewing Storm, and some of the people standing in the background. (CI)*

While the image is supposed to focus on the deaths of X-men, the aggressor Callisto is featured more prominently and positioned physically above Storm. This suggests that Callisto is the dominant figure within this image, in comparison to Storm’s more

passive position on the ground. This is demonstrative of Goffmans's (1979: 40) conceptualisation of the 'ritualisation of subordination'. The ritualisation of subordination exemplifies a "classic stereotype of deference that is lowering oneself physically (...) Correspondingly, holding the body erect and the head high is stereotypically a mark of unashamedness, superiority and disdain" (ibid.:40). While this framework was designed to identify and address the gendered power structures that manifests within advertisements, applying it to similarly commercial works can reveal comparable manifestations that also serve to demonstrate how power imbalances are represented visually (Wallis, 2011; Döring, Reif, and Poeschl, 2016; Butkowski, 2021). This dichotomy between the characters is further exemplified through their body type, mode of dress, and appearance which creates further opposition by presenting the characters as masculine and feminine or active and passive and is evidenced within the compositional interpretations description of each character.

*Callisto has short, ruffled, dark hair and pale skin, she is not shown to be wearing make-up. She has a closed-lipped sly smile (the only people shown open-mouthed, with teeth are members of the background crowd). Callisto holds a black cape in her left hand that she appears to have removed from Storm and a knife in her right hand. While dishevelled, Callisto does not appear injured. Callisto is wearing leather trousers and motorcycle boots, a distressed cropped top, and a leather vest. She has an eyepatch covering her right eye. Led prone between the legs of Callisto is Storm.*

*Storm is a slim, toned, Black woman. She is twisted at the waist in such a way that highlights her breasts and hips. Her arms are raised and posed loosely with open upward facing palms. Storm has long, straight white hair worn loose, pouting lips, and closed eyes. Her skin is clear and does not have any visible blemishes of injuries and is wearing makeup. Her face is relaxed, and she looks peaceful, almost as if she were sleeping. She wears a black superhero suit that resembles a swimsuit that is joined at the front by a gold hoop that circles her navel, and gold cuffs on both wrists. (CI)*

Here Storm, a Black woman of African descent, is depicted with features such as light skin and straight hair that are prioritised in Eurocentric cultures which deem “blackness in itself ugly” (McKay et al, 2018: 2) and positions “light-skinned black woman with straight or wavy hair who most closely resembles the white “ideal” as the most attractive” (McKay et al, 2018: 2). As the only Black woman in the dataset, Storm is burdened with representing Black women as a group in an environment where socially, Black women are pressured to conform to a white standard of beauty that is both condemning and prone toward fetishising natural and protective hairstyles, dark skin, and black features (Buchanan, 1993; Patton, 2006), and historically are considered “culpable in their own sexual objectification” (Watson et al., 2012: 459). This culpability is further demonstrated through her outfit and posing both of which serves to display and emphasise her body.

In contrast, Callisto is portrayed as a more masculine figure than Storm and this is evidenced in the first instance through body type and dress. For example, while both characters are slim, Callisto's body type is more muscular whereas Storm is represented as softer and more curvaceous. Here musculature serves to bring Callisto's femininity into question as it conflicts “with a gender schema which equates femininity with weakness and beauty” (Schubert, 2019: 161). Similarly, while Callisto's outfit does show off her midriff and arms, it does not serve to emphasise her breasts, waist, or buttocks, but rather it functions to display her musculature. Conversely, Storm's outfit emphasises her feminine form. This serves to further highlight Storm's femininity as it is symbolic of passivity in relation to Callisto's active masculinity. Callisto's position as the more masculine of the characters is further demonstrated by her use of a bladed weapon. Knives and other bladed weapons are considered phallic in nature and symbolic of masculinity (Dickson and Cornelius, 2015). Clover (1996) argues that arming women in this way is an attempt to phallicise them so as to make them more relatable to male audiences. Even so, it has been posited that men are only able to perform acts of cross gender identification when subject to all of the following conditions; “when the heroine is not a foil to a hero; when the male viewer lacks sexual attraction to the female character,

allowing the male viewer to move beyond his desire to potentially possess the female character; and finally, when the female character acts outside of her gender's norms" (Allmand, 2019: 162). Here Callisto is representative as the less sexually attractive character and is also seen to be acting outside of her gender norms. This in turn allows for a cross gender identification that functions to position Callisto as a male audience proxy in opposition to Storm, the passive feminine. Callisto's eyepatch also serves to negate her femininity through the allusion of disability as the 'disabled body represents the undesirable' (Solvang, 2007: 51). This imposition of asexuality upon the disabled body functions to dehumanise women by de-feminising them, rendering women as "un-woman, by virtue of being unrecognised by a sexualising gaze" (Cahill, 2011: 92). Furthermore, disability and disfigurement are also often used as a "metaphor for evil" (Ellis, 2015:7) or a means for communicating that someone is in some way untrustworthy (Royal, 2012) in contemporary western media which associates ugliness with a moral inferiority (Donnelly, 2016; Snyder and Mitchell, 2015). This also serves to solidify Callisto's role as the villain within the image.

The contrasting masculinity and femininity of the characters represented within the image was also highlighted by participants. Jesse and Rowen, for example, discussed the masculinization of Callisto in contrast to Storm's more traditionally feminine appearance, stating,

I really hate this cover. One thing I notice that I REALLY fucking hate is that the "bad guy" standing over her is drawn with masculine characteristics that really contrast to the way Storm is drawn. Like I'm trying to think about why I read the character standing over as female. Maybe the low waisted pants and slight curve for breasts, maybe kind of finer features? Storm is all curves and supine but deformed. I mean other than the knife in the hand of the person standing over her I wouldn't know she's dead or even dying. (Jesse: capitalisation participants own)

I'm not a fan of how the character with the eye-patch is standing over her body or how Storm could be the only character of color on that cover. She's also got a sort of bedroom face, like she's asleep. She looks like she doesn't have superpowers. There's no evidence of her having used the ones that we know (because she's an iconic character) she has. In contrast, the character over her looks powerful, but not because of superpowers. If she had superpowers, why would she need the knife that clearly wasn't used on Storm's flawless body? Whose blood is that?? Was Storm stabbed in the back and then flipped to look pretty? I agree with [Jesse], there is a gendered aspect that makes it feel like the masculine is dominating the feminine, between the outfits and the poses. Death is feminine, murder is masculine (Rowen).

Here Callisto's characterisation as masculine creates additional opposition between her and Storm, the more traditionally feminine of the two. The visual difference between the characters as it pertains to femininity and masculinity could be explained with reference to the 'Marvel Way' through which 'a woman is drawn to look smooth and soft as opposed to the muscular, angular rendition of a man' (Lee and Buscema, 1984:44). While Callisto is decidedly not a man, the visual dichotomy suggested by the Marvel Way provides a visual shorthand by which to delineate the characters and create assumptions about their persons. For example, this masculinization further solidifies Callisto's dominance and serves to situate murder as the active masculine position in opposition to death as the passive feminine position. A position echoed by Foltyns (2008b: 167) assertion that "stereotypical constructions of femininity continue to mark women as victims and men as criminals". This additionally serves to undermine Storm's position as superheroic insofar as she is situated as the weaker character due to her femininity. This is further evidenced in the discussion between Jesse and Rowen which also highlights how the image does not function to situate Storm as superheroic. Rather, as Rowen suggests, "She looks like she doesn't have superpowers". The image therefore serves not to demonstrate Storm's superheroism or portray a superheroic death, but rather functions to remove Storm's superheroic status by negating her powers and instead focusing on how attractive Storm can look even while dead, highlighting her

“curves”, “flawless body”, and “bedroom face”. Similarly both Jesse and Rowen note that Storm does not look dead, rather it is the presence of the knife and the position of the characters in the image that indicate violence rather than any visible injury. The removal of Storm’s superheroic status is further supported by Rowen’s assertion that what has taken place in the image is murder, rather than the result of a heroic battle or fight.

Other participants were less concerned with the masculine-feminine dichotomy presented within the image and more focused with how it manifested between the image and its intended audience through sexual objectification along with the narrative implications of the image, particularly those with knowledge of the characters and their fictional histories. Cecilia for example, in reference to the image stated,

The death of Ororo [Storm] just feels like it came right out of a prison exploitation film. She’s limp and doll-like on the ground, her body posed sensually, with her breasts and bare thighs on clear display. Callisto standing over her just looks like an anonymous attacker or aggressor. The years of narrative and emotional context between these characters is nowhere to be found to ground this scene in something meaningful or impactful. A sexy woman stabs another sexy woman, for the presumed male audience to gawk at. (Cecilia)

The prison exploitation or women in prison films are a subgenre of predominantly pornographic exploitation movies that feature female prisoners being subjected to various forms of physical and sexual abuses (King, 2016). To suggest that this death is reminiscent of this genre is to highlight the objectification that is evident within this image. Notably, this description which positions both Storm and Callisto as ‘sexy’ stands in opposition to earlier assertions which suggest that Callisto’s disability serves to desexualise her. Rather by reframing the image in line with the tropes of the women in prison genre, a genre predicated on the narrative that centres “women

surveying other women, women objectifying other women” (Schwan, 2016: 477). Callisto’s disability serves only to position her as deviant (Ellis, 2015; Donnelly, 2016; Snyder and Mitchell, 2015). Additionally, the description of Storm, referred here as Ororo, as doll-like further exemplifies the passivity she demonstrates. Likened here to a toy, an object designed to be possessed and manipulated by an active participant. Cecilia also demonstrates her knowledge of the characters and their history. Stating that the impact of this narrative has been removed in favour of creating an image that appeals to the ‘presumed male audience’. The positioning of a male audience as instrumental in the image composition relates to conceptions of the necro-gaze (May, 2009), a product of the male gaze (Mulvey, 2009), which positions women and, by extension, female superheroes as “malleable, feminine, pleasure providing and privilege affirming” (May, 2009: 167) for the benefit of a male spectator. Cecilia’s ideas were supported in conversation by Hazel who, in describing the image stated,

It looks boring in the sense of “Ah yes, a fight! And it’s bloodless! And they’re dead! And... why should I care?” because it does look all limp and sexy. Their deaths are handled with more consideration of how lovely they can look with no life left in them. (Hazel)

Hazel raises questions about the image's impact, noting that it prioritises what Storm looks like in death rather than the circumstances. As Stabile (2009) suggests, even in death a female superhero’s value is dependent on their being worthy of the male gaze, not as a superhero who has fallen in battle but rather as a sexual object because while “men have bodies that will prevail, that are strong and impenetrable. Female bodies are not represented as active agents in this way, but instead as breakable, takable bodies” (Stabile, 2009: 17).

Also highlighted is the lack of blood in the image, and while there is some blood present insofar as it appears on the blade of the knife that Callisto is holding, the image is otherwise bloodless. That is to say that neither character is shown to be cut

or bleeding from otherwise obscured injuries. This absence of blood is common across the data set, notable as the majority of the female characters included and every female character discussed within this chapter has encountered an aggressor with a blade. The lack of blood within the image stands in opposition to Seltzer's (1998) concept of *wound culture* which describes 'the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons' (Seltzer, 1998: 1). Instead, this can be explained using Kristeva's (1982) concept of the abject which suggests that bodily fluids are markers of the abject. Here the presence of blood would serve to disrupt the boundary between woman as subject, that is a woman as an agentic and active participant, and woman as object, through its association to menstruation and childbearing and reinforcing the claim that "men shed blood in public order to maintain social order whereas women's bloodshed manifests their individual reproductive existence, and must remain hidden" (Ogden, 2007: 118). Again, this suggests that the objectification of Storm, and the potential of its visual appeal to male audiences outweighs any narrative or historical context the image might otherwise convey.

Further discussion of the image between Cecilia and Hazel returns to the issue of the narrative context and reinforces their earlier points regarding objectification through vanquishment. Here Cecilia scrutinises the image further stating,

It's weird because I know the narrative context this cover is trying to evoke, but it's just...odd. If I didn't already know the story between these characters, I would really glean nothing from this cover, other than one woman killed another, and one is posed provocatively on the ground, as usual. They both just read like dolls posed by the artist because it looks good and that's how women die right??? Storm looks like a sexy doll. It makes me uncomfortable. it doesn't look like she put up a fight or had agency in this scenario at all. If it's meant to read as tragic, Callisto gloating over her body gives the wrong impression entirely. Is this triumphant for Callisto or tragic for Storm? Who am I supposed to align with here? The artist simply gives me a sexy dead woman



on the ground and expects me to feel something -- whether it's pants-feelings or head-feelings, I don't know. And I don't like it, either way. (Cecilia)

As noted previously Cecilia was familiar with the story to which this cover image was paying homage and due to the divergent narrative it portrayed, she found the contents confusing specifically with regards to who she, as the audience, should be supporting. Instead, Cecilia finds herself contending with the function of the image, questioning how she is supposed to react when the villain has been elevated to a dominant position and the hero has been reduced to a sexual object. This inability to assign a "socially appropriate emotion" (Foltyn, 2008b: 167) is highlighted by Foltyn when discussing 'corpse porn', or the sexualisation of the "gorgeous victims of unnatural, violent deaths" (ibid.: 166), noting that here objectification serves to render "grief, reflection, and discussion of the preciousness of life" (ibid.: 166) absent.

Additionally, Cecilia highlights Storm's lack of agency and the absence of evidence pointing towards Storm's active participation within this altercation. This was supported by Jesse who said, "all of Storm's agency or potential for agency is gone" (Jesse). Again, Storm is situated as passive, vanquished entirely by her aggressor. Similarly, Hazel describes the image as follows, "it's just so...victim-y? And I hate it. Because she just seems so...weak?" (Hazel). Here Hazel likens Storm to a victim and suggests that the image points towards weakness. Weakness along with vulnerability are among the factors required to be considered an ideal victim (Schwobel-Patel, 2018). Notably, while both of these are also factors in the construction of femininity (Gibson, 2015), neither characteristics are associated with superheroes nor the superheroic death. Cecilia also suggests that to see a woman's body laid provocatively on the ground following her death as within this image is not unusual, rather as Foltyn (2008b:166) suggests, beautiful corpses "now appear regularly" across the media landscape.

Rose displays similar feelings regarding the image and its narrative context and impact, asserting that,

This image weirds me out for a few reasons, chief among them being that Callisto has never once measured up to Storm as a combatant. This cover in particular is its own 'what if' - what if storm lost her challenge for leadership of the morlocks? So it's a very abrupt and violent end. There's also this thing where...is she actually dead? I don't see a knife wound despite the blade in Callisto's hand. I see Storm laid out, but there's nothing here that makes her look dead as opposed to just unconscious. (Rose)

Rose, like Cecilia, is also familiar with the story being referenced by the image and likens it to the '*What if...*' line of Marvel Comics that explore alternative outcomes and scenarios that are otherwise canon divergent. However, Rose also suggests that if this is the case the image should portray violence. Instead, the image is bloodless. Further demonstrating how a woman's bloodshed "must remain hidden" (Ogden, 2007: 118) and highlighting that rather than portraying Storm's superheroic abilities this image instead focuses on her beauty and situates her as a passive object rather than an active subject within the altercation.

When asked how they would categorise this death, participants tended toward a negative reading. For example, Rose stated,

It feels very...ignoble. For all that she's died trying to do something heroic, knowing the history and knowing what is denied her in this instance feels...bad. I think some of it is the framing...she's pristine, laid out like she's sleeping. She doesn't look like she fought hard and fell, she looks like she got suckered from behind. (Rose)

Here Rose highlights the lack of evidence of heroic action, noting that Storm does not look like she's fought, and as such has been vanquished by her aggressor. Rose also notes the passivity of Storm's pose, comparing it to sleeping which suggests

something peaceful rather than a potentially violent death. Rowen agreed with Rose's position describing the death as follows,

This is a bad death, which is exacerbated by a bad image. It's playing on the reader's ability to identify Storm to know that this is bad, not just because it's ill-fitting but also because she sits at the very bottom of the cover. The center is the other character, and more specifically it's the other character's crotch. It's an undignified death. These artists posed these women like dolls and it's super gross. You don't see men laid out like this. (Rowen)

Rowen highlights the composition, and suggests that Storm's position on the cover further demonstrates the indignity as Storm is not only shown to have been killed in an undignified manner, she is also not even the most important person in the image. Additionally, Rowen makes note of the objectification present within the image, comparing Storm and Callisto to dolls. Jesse agreed that this death was bad, also questioning the narrative coherence of the image.

If it's a death it's a dumb one. Which makes it bad. Because, like wtf is even going on there. The whole composition is just very "male gaze" to me. (Jesse)

Jesse went on to suggest that the composition was reflective of a male gaze (Mulvey, 2009). This serves to position Storm as a passive object, subject to the pleasure deriving gaze of a male audience.

By engaging with the sub theme 'vanquished' as it underpins the key theme 'objectified' it has become apparent that while the image does portray the death of a superhero it does not represent a superheroic death. Rather this death communicates the female superhero body made passive in death thus serving to remove her power and agency and by extension her superheroic status while retaining her beauty so as to continue her objectification under the gaze of a

presumed male audience postmortem. Building on these findings, the next section, *relinquished*, will continue to explore how the deaths of female superheroes are represented visually and how these representations relate to power and agency.

## 6. 2 Relinquished

This section will address how female characters are represented as relinquishing their agency and yielding to their death rather than continuing to fight and dying as the result of heroic action. Within this section objectification will be discussed in reference to its relationship to the sub theme 'relinquished'. In contrast to the vanquished sub-theme, this sub theme includes evidence of a superhero having fought back to an extent but when faced with their impending death they have elected to relinquish their agency which leads to them being situated as passive and accepting in the face of their impending death. This can be exemplified through the laying down of arms, or the apparent compliance with an aggressor. This theme is supported by findings that suggest that people willingly relinquish their agency when faced with physical violence if they think that that violence will lead to their death as it is believed that compliance will result in less detrimental consequences (Bettache and Chiu, 2018). However, the relinquishing of agency as a means to potentially prolong one's life is not within the remit of the superhero whose role implies their ability to either "overcome whatever obstacles lay ahead" (Smith, 2009: 132) or die in the process of making a "heroic last stand" (Loidl, 2010: 181). As with the previous section, the primary theme of objectification and the sub theme relinquished will be discussed in parallel rather than separately as each serve to reinforce the other. That is to say objectification is both the cause and result of her having relinquished her power and agency and that together they serve to reinforce the removal of her superheroic status that in turn leads to female superheroes being positioned as unable to achieve a superheroic death.

### 6.2.1 Wolverine - Relinquished

Addressing the sub theme 'relinquished', this section argues that representations of female superheroes yielding to their aggressors by relinquishing their agency and failing to engage with superheroic action situates them as passive, legitimises the removal of their superhero status and renders the superheroic death unobtainable. This loss of power and agency also functions to reinforce their objectification, situating their beauty as paramount. Evidence for this sub theme is demonstrated through the perceived passive or submissive response to an aggressor and is exemplified primarily through traits associated with objectification (Bernard, De Laet, and Gervais, 2021) such as gesture, pose, facial expression. References to the sub theme relinquished as it relates to submission and reinforces objectification can be found within both the compositional interpretation (CI) and the participant data. Addressing first the compositional interpretation, Wolverine, the focal character within the image (see fig. 8) is described as follows:

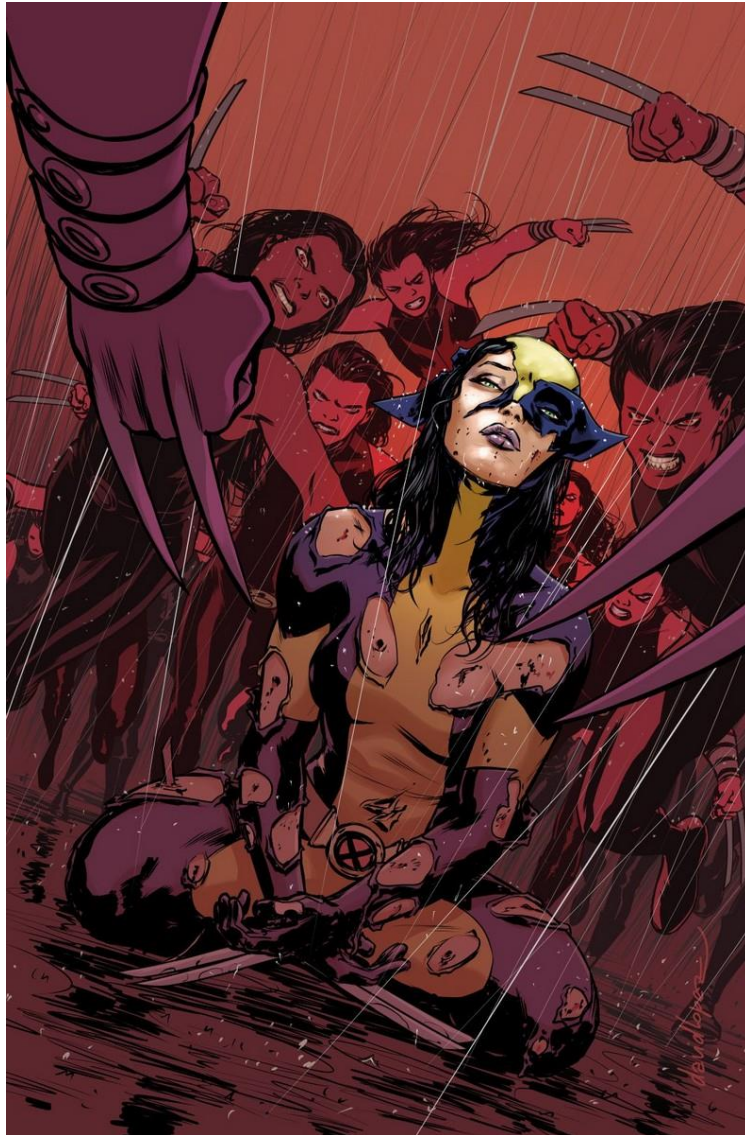


Fig. 8 – ‘Wolverine’ - Amazing Spider-Man #15 variant by David Lopez

*A woman positioned on her knees in the rain. Her shoulders are hunched forward, and her arms are crossed at the wrist, palms facing upwards across her lap. From the backs of her hands protrude twin blades. Despite her hunched posture, her head is angled back, exposing her throat. She is surrounded by a number of young women. Each armed with the same double bladed protrusions as Wolverine. However unlike Wolverine, they are posed so as to demonstrate aggression, for example, their hands are raised in fists and their facial expressions show gritted teeth.*

*Wolverine's facial expression is soft, eyes are hooded, she has a small nose and full, pouting lips that are slightly apart, her hair is mid length, dark, and worn loose around her face. She is gazing directly at the viewer. She has high cheekbones and thin manicured eyebrows. She is shown to be wearing makeup although this likely would have been obscured were her mask and cowl not damaged. There are some flecks of what could be mud or blood across her face. She is wearing a yellow and black superhero costume that is complete with a cowl that covers the upper part of her face. While tight fitting it is not revealing, in fact were it not for the obvious battle damage that has created holes across the right side of her face, shoulders, chest, arms and thighs the uniform would cover her entire body. The areas exposed by the damage show puncture wounds and grazes but there is no visible blood (CI).*

The relinquishing of power and agency is evidenced in the first instance by the positioning of Wolverine on her knees and situated below her aggressors. This is indicative of Goffman's (1979) ritualisation of subordination. Explicated in the previous section (see section 6.1.1), the ritualisation of subordination describes means of representing people in ways that communicate deference or submission. Here Wolverine's physically lower position denotes her inferior status within the group. Similarly, her gestures also suggest submission, for example her position on her knees, exposed throat and open palms (Goffman, 1979). Additionally, her hunched posture suggests that she is attempting to make herself look smaller; this postural constriction is further demonstrative of submission (Tiedens and Fragale, 2003; Bailey and Kelly, 2015) as it serves to make a person appear less threatening or dominant. Furthermore, while Wolverine is in possession of weapons, which is to say that whilst the blades that are a part of her body are present and functional, she is making no visible effort to use them. Rather she is seen with her open palms facing up, and while this does not render her as traditionally unarmed, it creates a scenario in which she has plausibly surrendered her weapons. Surrender or the relinquishing of agency so as to appease a violent aggressor is common amongst those who expect their own death as it serves to make them more agreeable and may contribute to survival (Bettache and Chiu, 2018). This is in line with terror management theory which suggests that "acute awareness of death has the

potential to cause terrifying anxiety” (Juhl and Routledge, 2016: 99) that can influence a person's decision making as they seek to control their surroundings so as to prioritise their survival. However, while this decision may extend Wolverine's life, surrender and submission are not outcomes associated with either the superhero or the superheroic death. The lack of injury to her aggressors in comparison to the damage Wolverine exhibits also demonstrates that while she may have fought back it has either not been with the same amount of aggression that her attackers have towards her, or that it was for a shorter amount of time. Additionally, while Wolverine is shown to relinquish her agency within this situation, her aggressors are not shown to be ceasing but rather continuing their assault as would be expected (Bettache and Chiu, 2018). This in turn has allowed her aggressors to overpower her, thus making Wolverine appear weak and by extension unheroic.

Furthermore, Wolverine's facial expression does not suggest that she is in pain, nor does it communicate fear, rather it is styled to suggest seduction. The use of the direct gaze towards the viewer for example is considered “an important social cue that signals another person's interest and willingness to engage in social interaction” (Strick, Holland and van Knippenberg, 2008: 1488). Similarly the hooded eyes and slightly parted lips are associated with sexual arousal and excitement (Fernández-Dols, Carrera, and Crivelli, 2011). This is further exemplified through the utilisation of selective detail, a process by which certain areas of an image are rendered in such a way as to improve clarity, Wolverine's face has been spot lit, with her lips and eyes further highlighted, this functions to in to draw the viewer's eye directly toward it (DiPaola, Riebe and Enns, 2013). This suggests that this image was designed with the intention of guiding the observer's gaze towards not only her face but her lips and eyes, accentuating them and her potential as a sexual object rather than as a superhero. Additionally, the absence or minimal presence of blood again relates to Kristeva's (1982) conceptualisation of the abject. Even when the wounds are visible, the association between blood and menstruation (Ogden, 2007) detracts the sexualisation inherent in objectification and disrupts the male gaze. This bloodlessness however was not raised by participants, whose analysis was primarily concerned with the image's implications of sexual violence and links to submission. Tilly, for example, describes the cover as “very sexual” stating,



Her clothes are torn, skin exposed, and submission positioning. She looks like she might be raped before they kill her. I think it's probably specially designed to elicit specific feelings in young boys. You know, thinking they may see more inside. (Tilly)

Here Tilly highlights the potential, or intended, audience for this image suggesting that the image was designed to invoke certain feelings amongst a specific (male) demographic. However, Tilly made this assessment in line with her understanding that the image alluded to sexual violence, thus situating this image as demonstrative of “corpse porn” (Foltyn, 2008) and serving to satisfy the necro-gaze (May, 2009). By catering to this gaze, images that combine sexual submission and death are arguably “contributing to an ideology that romanticises and sexualises violence against women” (May, 2009: 168). This was supported by Vanessa who agreed that “aside from what’s already been said about the sexualisation she also looks like she’s about to be gang raped”. In linking the image to sexual violence participants evidenced how, through objectification, Wolverine has been rendered not only a victim, a term which culturally communicates ideas of weakness and submission (Dunn, 2012) but a sex object. Together these labels function to reduce Wolverine’s superheroic status in the eyes of the audience. Moreover, throughout this section, due to not being familiar with this character, participants exclusively referred to the Wolverine as a/the women, never as a hero or superhero, therefore failing to acknowledge her superheroic status. As such Wolverine is not only stripped of her agency as a superhero in the course of her death, but also removed by the audience too.

Participants also made reference to submission, understood within this section at the product of relinquishment. Tilly, for example, described the image as showing a “woman who has been overpowered and lost the battle. She looks submissive and like she's given in to her fate. Like she's waiting to die” (Tilly). Here Tilly positions Wolverine in the first instance as having lost the battle, this suggests some active engagement as would be expected of a superhero. However, she goes on to say

that Wolverine looks as though she has given in; this indicates that rather than having lost the battle, Wolverine has chosen to give up, to submit to the fate of losing the fight. To submit in this instance would not allow Wolverine to meet the criteria for a superheroic death, and as such would be precluded for achieving one. Vanessa also understood the image as representative of submission stating that,

She is so submissive and vulnerable, just a woman who needs to be saved by some hench bloke as at this point it's her only hope. I want to know what made her give up so easily. (Vanessa)

In addition to positioning Wolverine as both submissive and vulnerable, here Vanessa further situates her as a victim by suggesting that her only hope in this situation is to be saved by a male counterpart. This suggests that not only does Vanessa perceive Wolverine as incapable of saving herself, but that she thinks that Wolverine's aggressors could be overpowered by a man in Wolverine's position. This reading does not allow for Wolverine to save herself but rather lends support to arguments which suggest that female superheroes are less competent and less physically capable than their male counterparts, and as such require saving (De Wulf Helskens, Dhaenens, and Van Leuven, 2021). Additionally, Vanessa queries why Wolverine would give up, this indicates that Vanessa, like Tilly, understands Wolverine's surrender as a choice. However, when considered in line with the language participants used to describe Wolverine, "submissive", "vulnerable", and "weak" for example, it can be surmised that the choice envisioned by participants was not one intended to prolong survival via the relinquishment of agency as suggested by Bettache and Chiu (2018). Rather this choice is understood as a means to expedite her death at the hands of her aggressors, and therefore further demonstrate Wolverine's weakness. Viewing Wolverine's death in terms of the relinquishing of power and agency over submission does not however redeem Wolverine nor function to reinstate her superheroic status, as both readings position the circumstances of her death in opposition to the superheroic death, that is one that comes as the result of both agency and superheroic action.

By engaging with the sub theme 'relinquished' as it relates to the key theme 'objectified' it has been evidenced across that the yielding of power and agency is viewed as evidence of submission and by extension weakness and leads to the removal of both Wolverine's agency and superheroic status by the audience. This in turn serves to reinforce objectification as the female superhero is made passive while simultaneously removing the potential for a superheroic death. Continuing to build upon these findings the next section, *defiant*, will engage with a further conceptualisation of objectification as it has emerged from the data and is evidence within the data set, exploring how defiance serves to impact understandings of power and agency

## 6.3 Defiant

This section will address how female characters are represented as defiant when apprehended by an aggressor prior to their death and how this defiance serves to undermine rather than support their superheroic status. Within this section, the sub theme 'defiance' relates broadly to instances in which the image can be understood showing the female character as physically resisting her aggressor or engaging in other behaviours that demonstrate noncompliance. Physical resistance may be exemplified via gestures such as fighting back (Lindegaard, Bernasco, and Jacques, 2015) or through attempts to escape for example the "pulling, and attempting to overcome bonds" (Collie and Shalev Greene, 2016:282). Additional noncompliance may be demonstrated through angry facial expressions as these are understood as cues to otherwise threatening behaviours (Krems et al, 2015). As demonstrated across previous sections, the sub theme 'defiance' will be discussed in parallel with the key theme 'objectification' as they serve to reinforce each other.

### 6.3.1 Magik - Defiance

In addressing the sub theme 'defiance' as it manifests visually and is evidenced within both the compositional interpretation and participant data, this section argues that unsuccessful opposition to an aggressor functions to exemplify weakness through the negation of power, situating female superheroes as less physically capable and therefore subordinate to their male counterparts. The positioning of female superheroes as weak additionally serves to situate them as unheroic distancing them from the superheroic death. References to defiance can be found in both the compositional interpretation (CI) and participant data. Focusing first on the compositional interpretation, defiance emerges as integral to the composition of the image (see fig. 9). In describing the image, the compositional interpretation states,

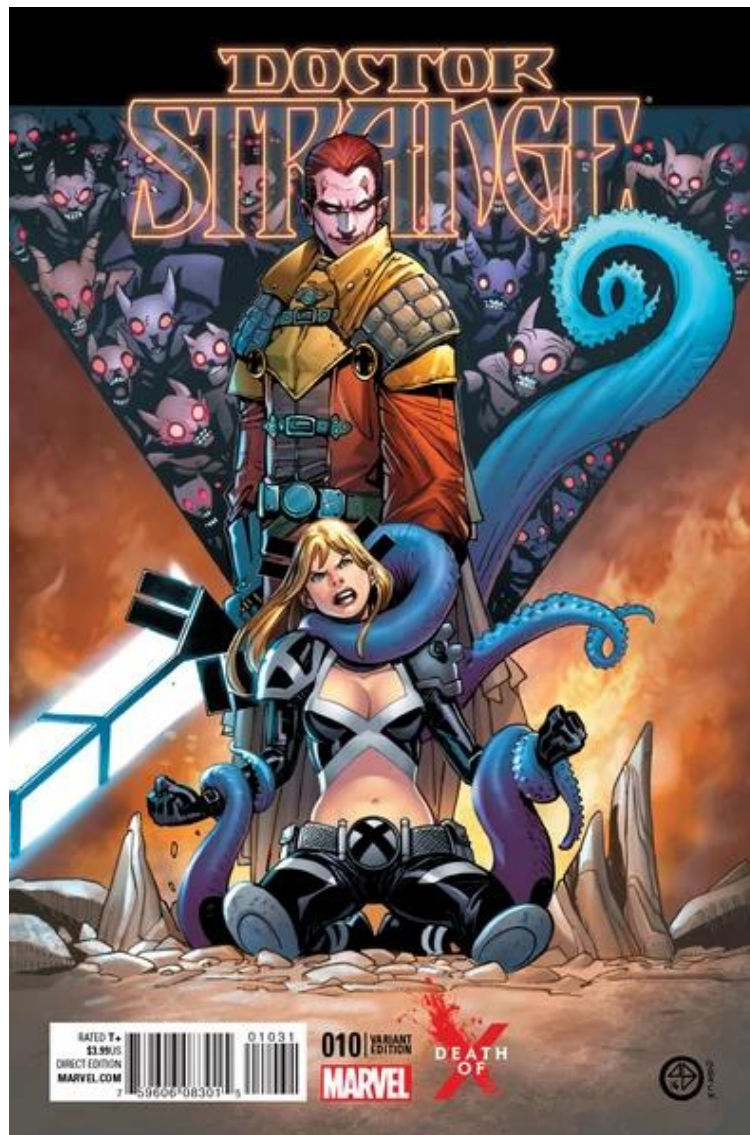


Fig. 9 – 'Magik' - Doctor Strange #10 variant by Andrea Broccardo and Sonia Oback

*The image shows in the midground, a white man with a closed-lipped smile, and in the foreground, a white woman, Magik, on her knees, restrained by large blue tentacles that wrap around her wrists and throat and positioned at his feet. The background is occupied by numerous demonic entities with horns and glowing red eyes. The man's outfit covers all that we can see of his body other than his head. The man holds, in his right hand, a large glowing sword angled down toward the ground. He is smirking and looking pleased to have overpowered the woman. The man's outfit covers all that we can see of his body other than his head. The outfit is clearly designed to protect his body. In contrast, the woman wears a cropped top that shows her cleavage and midriff and a pair of low-cut black trousers with an oversized belt buckle that draws the eye to the crotch. Whilst there is a suggestion of armour on her shoulders and knees, her clothes provide no protection. Her hair is long, blonde, and worn loose. She has blue eyes, and her skin is clear and unblemished. She does not have visible injuries and there is no evidence of blood. However, she looks angry, she is showing both sets of teeth and her eyebrows are drawn together and down. Her fists are balled, and her arms appear tensed, as if they are pulling upwards to escape the tentacles (CI).*

Situating the aggressor above the female character, Magik, is, once again, a demonstration of Goffman's (1979) "ritualisation of subordination", which, as noted above (see sections 6.1.1 and 6.2.1), is a gender display that exemplifies how women are visually represented as subordinate or submissive to their male counterparts. Here Magik is positioned as physically below her aggressor, both figuratively and literally, as to suggest submission or deference. Additionally, within the framework, kneeling, particularly when viewed alongside others who are standing, is considered a sign of submission (Goffman, 1979). Furthermore, Magik is bound, which suggests she has been overpowered, this indicates weakness in so much as she has been unable to defend herself adequately to avoid this situation. In so far as this relates to Magik's position as a superhero, neither submission nor

weakness are considered emblematic of superheroism, rather these characteristics suggest she has been overpowered therefore demonstrating her weakness.

However, in spite of her current position, Magik appears to be physically resistant to her aggressor, therefore demonstrating her defiance and the retention of agency, unlike Wolverine who has met violence with the relinquishment of her power and agency (see section 6.2.1), Magik's approach is fore fronted by anger and aggression. This is evidenced in the first instance by her attempt to escape her bonds, a common resistance strategy (Collie and Shalev Greene, 2016) and an indication that she is not submitting to her aggressor. She is also shown with clenched fists, a symbol of aggression (Pahlavan, Bonnet, & Duda, 2000), and indicative of her desire to remove herself from the situation. The clenched fist is also linked to self-encouragement as it triggers a "physiological feedback mechanism that functions to increase or sustain levels of approach in challenging situations by signalling the sufficiency of resources (muscle strength)" (Tops and De Jong, 2006: 229) thus affording Magik the stamina required to overcome her aggressor. Furthermore, Magik's facial expression is one of rage, an expression understood as a cue towards both threats (Krems et al, 2015) and strength (Sell, Cosmides, and Tooby, 2014). This further demonstrates Magik's defiance as exemplified through resistance. Nevertheless, she has been overpowered, which even when met with resistance continues to suggest weakness.

Unlike Magik, the man in the image is shown to be armed with a large sword. This indicates to the audience that he holds the power within the image as even if Magik were to escape her bonds she would still be facing her armed aggressor without an obvious means of defence. Furthermore, the presence of and the positioning of the sword are indicative of the sexually sadistic connotations of the image. The sword, for example, serves as a phallic symbol, much like Callisto's knife (see fig. 7), and is used to emphasise masculinity while simultaneously being indicative of penetration. Correspondingly, this positioning of the sword protruding from the man's groin area creates a visual innuendo (Dickson and Cornelius, 2015) that further alludes to the sexual nature of the image. Similarly, the use of tentacles as restraints rather than

other forms of bondage in this instance may be a reference to the 'tentacle porn' made famous in Japan due to 'censorship laws that prevent that depiction of genitalia' (Hambleton, 2015: 431). Sexual sadism is not uncommon within the "subgenre of monster porn" (Saunders, 2021:1). A subgenre that broadly "echoes conservative pornography's performances of heteronormative masculinity" (ibid.: 4) and reproduces behaviours found in more extreme forms of pornography that centre sexual violence and brutalisation. When viewed together these factors, along with Magik's subordinate position on her knees further alludes to imminent sexual violence.

Additionally, Magik is portrayed wearing a revealing outfit that does not function as armour nor serve to draw attention to her musculature (Plotz, 2023), as is common with male superheroes. Rather this outfit functions only to highlight Magik's body, catering to a male gaze that "immediately places her in a hierarchically inferior position, both with the other characters (...) and, to some extent, with the reader" (Piatti-Farnell, 2017: 248). Furthermore, the comparative states of dress exhibited by Magik and her counterpart - Magik in her revealing costume and her counterpart fully covered with exception of his face - serve to influence the body gaze (Hollet et al, 2022). The body gaze is a feature of sexual objectification and describes the attribution of "preferential visual attention toward body parts (compared to the face)" (ibid.: 2759). Here Magik's costume encourages the audience to gaze at Magik's body rather than her face thus reducing her to simply a body thus reinforcing these objectifying behaviours. Similarly presenting her aggressor as fully clothed, displaces the body gaze instead inviting a non-objectifying head-based gaze.

Sexualisation through visual indicators of sexual violence were also raised by participants who link these phenomena to the tastes of the perceived male audience. Claire, for example, raised the issue of who is looking at these images, or rather who is the intended audience suggesting that this image is designed to appeal to heterosexual male readers over female readers, therefore prioritising a presumed male gaze. She also notes that this appeal corresponds with enjoyment as it relates to the female body not the female character, thus demonstrating how this cover

serves to elicit objectification (Hollet et al, 2022). This indicates that in this instance that the objectification of Magik is the point of the cover, not accidental. Claire goes on to say that:

Looking at this cover gets my blood boiling. A female character being killed on the cover is bad enough but she has to be posed sexually to still appeal to the straight male gaze? Her clothes are needlessly revealing and the tentacles, I have to imagine, are phallic symbolism of some kind. Female characters are far too often treated this way by comic covers--eye candy and torture porn rolled into one. (Claire)

Claire again links the sexualisation of Magik to its potential to appeal to a male audience that is focused on dominated women (Chute, 2007). Claire also makes notes of the tentacles that are being utilised as restraints and posits that they may represent phallic symbols (Hambleton, 2015). These features in parallel support Claire's claim that representations of women are reduced to "eye candy and torture porn" (Claire). Torture porn refers to a subgenre of horror cinema that typically features "explicit scenes of torture and mutilation" (Lowenstein, 2011: 42). By aligning these representations with this genre, Claire highlights the prevalence of 'femmephobia'. Femmephobia is defined as "the devaluation or regulation of femininity" (Hoskin, 2020: 2320) and has been linked to prejudice, discrimination, and violence against those who exhibit femininity as it serves to reinforce traditional binary gender roles that situate men as dominant. The sexual nature of the image was also highlighted by Leanne, who said,

This cover irritates me from the get-go, I'm afraid! The pose of the main female character (going to show my Marvel ignorance here!) feels unnecessarily sexualised. I really, really hate the pose. Being on knees is one thing, but it feels like she is on display. Why is there always some kind of boob window on female characters' costumes? I keep looking at that belt and



thinking it would chafe. I think that cover epitomises the idea of lack of dignity from the way she is posed to the creepy audience watching her. (Leanne)

Leanne highlights the lack of dignity afforded to Magik as a result of sexualisation. Like Claire, Leanne makes note of Magik's revealing costume and her position on her knees. Leanne also raises the issues of who is looking or is intended to look, highlighting the presumed male gaze that these images cater to (Chute, 2007). Claire again highlights the link between objectification and the assumed male audience, stating,

Now that I've had a closer look, I'm even more annoyed by this cover. Her clothes are so needlessly revealing, and of course, she is conventionally attractive, because otherwise why would men buy this comic. But I see that the tentacles aren't just around her, they're tying her down. Sigh. So, not only is she being killed, but it's being done in a BDSM-adjacent manner (without any of the consent), to further appeal to the male gaze. It's gross. (Claire)

Here Claire positions objectification as a consequence of Magik's outfit and visual appeal but also necessary if the comic book is to succeed financially, thus lending support to the aphorism that 'sex sells'. This idea however is refuted by findings that suggest while sex appeals, that is 'a persuasion attempt that uses words, images, and/or actions by models appearing in ads to deliver an explicit or implicit sexual message designed to evoke sexual thoughts, feelings, and/or arousal in a target audience' (Wirtz, Sparks, and Zimbres, 2018: 169) may increase interest, they do not increase direct sales when the product itself is not directly related to sex (Stewart, Dalakas, and Eells, 2022). Claire then goes on to discuss the representative function of the tentacles which are being used as restraints associating them with sexual practices that within the scenario lack consent. This adds further support to analysis that links the presence of tentacles to those found within certain kinds of fetish pornography that are similarly utilised for bondage and penetration (Saunders, 2022). Additionally, by raising the issue of consent, Claire further highlights the

themes of sexual sadism that are evident within the image and therefore draws attention not only to the objectification of Magik but the sexualisation of her death. Claire continues to argue that the cover objectifies Magik for the benefit of its male audience and at the detriment of its female readers, stating,

This cover is disrespectful to the character, and to women readers. Maybe I'm being overly harsh and judgmental, but we've seen images like this far too often. I'm not going to give it a chance. Women, actually all non-cisgender straight white abled male characters, are treated as dispensable and objects of enjoyment for straight male readers, even when they are being killed. It's infuriating. (Claire)

Claire also makes note that it is not only women who are treated this way, rather it is everyone who does not meet the criteria of the hegemonic male ideal who is reduced to "objects of enjoyment" (Claire). This assertion is supported by previous arguments made by this thesis (see chapter four) which suggests that the narrative function of characters who are not men are less important than those who are. Leanne also questioned the narrative function of this death, querying if a tragic death could in turn validate Magik's superheroism, stating,

If the comic cover is telling me "hey there's this cool, strong female character™ but she's going to die at the hands of some creepy person and his personal entourage of demon boys", it just feels bleak. It comes across like she needs to have this tragic death because that will somehow validate her heroism? Women die all the time at the hands of men. This just seems like a less than nuanced reminder. (Leanne)

Here Leanne utilises the trademark symbol in her answer to indicate that this is not her conception of the strong female character. Rather that the image presents the platonic ideal as made popular in contemporary media and embodied by female

characters who are physically strong, competent, and most importantly attractive (Lynch et al, 2016). This demonstrates not only how female characters are widely conceived but also what aspects of their person are prioritised when subject to the male gaze. Additionally, in utilising the word “bleak” Leanne highlights how there is no sense of triumph, or glory to be had in this death. Magik is not a superhero at this moment, she is a woman who has been overpowered and who will eventually die at the hands of her aggressor. Here the domination of Magik serves to reduce her superheroic status through subordination as functions to reinforce traditional gender roles which “expect men to be dominant and aggressive, and women to be passive” (Angelone, Mitchell, and Grossi, 2015: 2282). Furthermore, Leanne notes that this image serves as a reminder of the very real violence women face every day. In highlighting this actuality, whether intentionally or not, this image functions to alienate the female audience, which prioritises a presumed male audience.

When discussing the image other participants also identified the relationship between subordination, domination, and defiance, further highlighting how this can be understood to be representative of powerlessness or weakness. Leanne, for example, describes the image as follows,

The female character is shown as “bound” by the character standing behind her. If she has abilities, she’s overwhelmed. She’s at the mercy of the other characters. She might be resisting them, but she’s being shown here as only defiant, not successful in her resistance. She feels relatively powerless and that the other character is able to exert control over her. (Leanne)

While Leanne makes note of Magik’s defiance she is cognizant of its futility. A futility that may be emphasised by prominent rape myths (Canan, Jozkowski, and Crawford, 2018) that suggest defiance or resistance is merely a contrivance used to protect a woman's reputation in situations where she does not want to appear sexually promiscuous (Canan, Jozkowski, and Crawford, 2018). In these scenarios “a woman is expected to provide “token resistance”” (Angelone, Mitchell, and Grossi,

2015: 2281) as this allows her to remain passive and reinforce male domination. This furthers the argument that in addition to situating Magik as subordinate, the image functions to utilise her defiance as evidence of passivity. In response to Leanne's statement, Claire further highlights Magik's defiance while also drawing attention to the lack of agency,

She [Magik] has little to no agency here. She's struggling against her bonds, so I'm assuming she either has no powers or her abilities have been negated. I don't like that the villain is so smugly, and easily, holding her down. It makes me feel ick--but I presume the point of this cover is to make male readers feel powerful, so female readers will automatically feel othered. (Claire)

Here Claire makes note of how the image makes her feel, expressing her disgust colloquially as "ick". In interrogating her feelings, Claire discerns that this disgust, her repulsion for misogyny and abuse, is potentially the point of the image as it highlights the power difference between the characters and indicates how this could be reproduced by audiences. In particular those who endorse conception of 'token resistance' (Canan, Jozkowski, and Crawford, 2018; Angelone, Mitchell, and Grossi, 2015). Leanne then returns to the idea of defiance and posits a scenario in which Magik could escape however when framed within the broader context of the image set, that is "Your favourite X-men dead and dying" (Yehl, 2016) Leanne finds the image and its contents to be undignified, stating,

To me this could be showing her about to die but it feels more strongly like it's showing her resisting. In a dangerous situation, but in the way all heroes are put into some kind of peril. Like the next step is her escaping. In the context of this being her dying, it feels as undignified as it could be. The artist might be trying to give her dignity by showing her defiance, but there's a confidence in the other character's stance and expression that emphasises more that she is considered a victim, weaker than them. (Leanne)

The indignity of the image manifests in the confidence displayed by Magik's aggressor despite her visible resistance as it suggests that his dominance is a certainty. This further supports arguments regarding the role of 'token resistance' (Canan, Jozkowski, and Crawford, 2018; Angelone, Mitchell, and Grossi, 2015). A form of mock resistance conceived by those who believe that women desire to be overpowered so they may retain their passivity and by extension their innocence in sexual situations. Furthermore, this is the first instance in which Magik is positioned as a victim, a term that alludes to weakness and submission (Dunn, 2012). The passivity suggested by the token resistance, and the weakness alluded to by Magik's victimisation serve to diminish Magik's superheroic status. Leanne further links these ideas to objectification and a lack of agency, stating,

This cover sums up what I dislike about how the deaths of women are portrayed; the lack of agency, the sense they are forever seen as victims. Also, the need to emphasise the boob window and her being practically spread-eagled feels like male gaze sweeping in. (Leanne)

Claire ended the discussion and summarised her argument regarding the image stating,

This cover makes me profoundly uncomfortable as a woman. It is undignified, it is not a release. It exemplifies the fears of non-men everywhere--that we will be killed struggling, sexualised, and without any agency (Claire).

Here Claire further demonstrates how female characters are subject to sexualisation and objectification even when shown to be dying, as exemplified by Foltyn's (2008) corpse chic. Objectification and sexualisation in this case position female characters as sex objects rather than superheroic subjects and as such remove their ability not only to exert agency but to achieve a heroic death. Additionally, revealed by the participants and compositional interpretation, the links between submission and

weakness, as demonstrated through defiance, which serves to disempowers female superheroes, thus stripping their agency. When viewed together this results in disempowered female superheroes being unable to attain a heroic death. Building upon and broadening the scope of these findings the next section, *heroic*, will engage with a further conceptualisation of objectification as it pertains to the female superheroic death.

## 6.4 Heroic

This section examines how even when afforded a superheroic death, female superheroism is devalued by objectification. Within the section the sub theme 'heroic' describes conventional conceptualisations of superheroism, particularly as it relates to the superheroic death. That is demonstrations of heroic action evidenced through representations of violence, and the use of or presence of superpowers, and sacrifice. This sub theme will be discussed in line with the key theme 'objectified' as with previous sections.

### 6.4.1 Psylocke - Heroic

Addressing the sub theme, 'heroic', this section argues that the superheroic deaths of female superheroes are viewed negatively in comparison with their male counterparts. This is the result of their superheroism being devalued through objectification which positions them as less worthy of their superheroic status as it functions to remove agency, and, by extension, a superheroic death. References to 'heroic' can be found within both the compositional interpretation and the participant data. Focusing first on the compositional interpretation the image is described as follows,

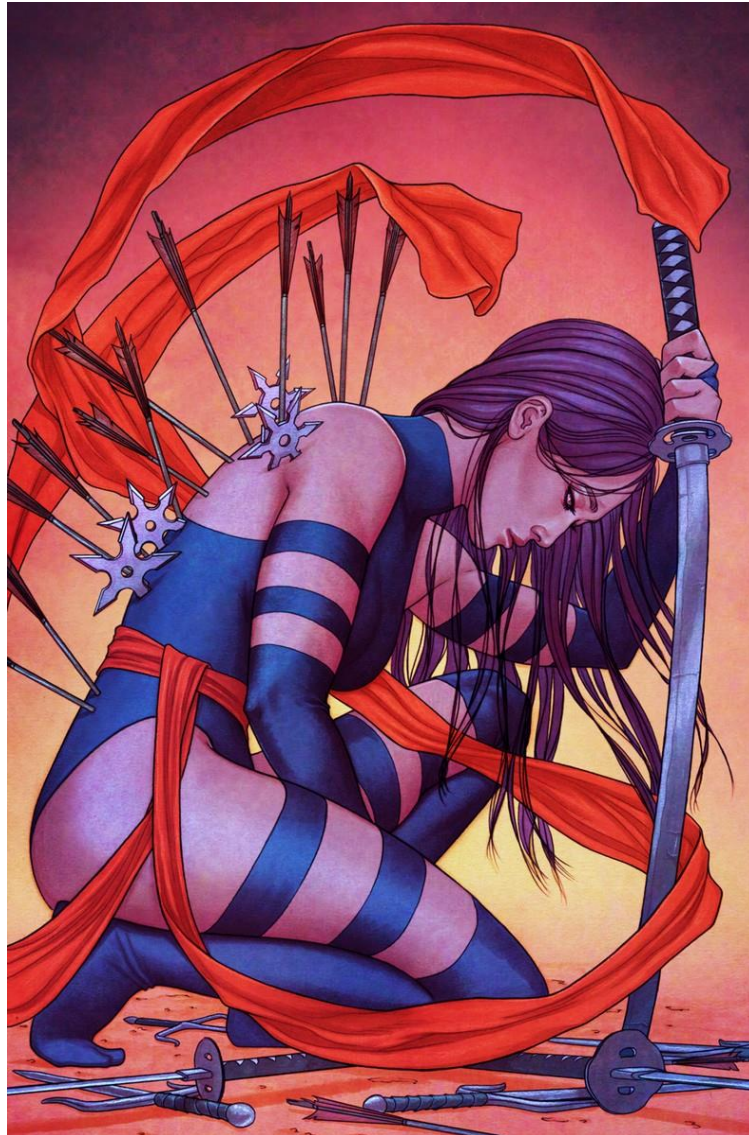


Fig. 10 – ‘Psylocke’ - *The Astonishing Ant-Man #10* variant by Jenny Frisson

*The image shows an east Asian woman kneeling in profile facing the viewers' right. She is in a one knee-heel down squat position with her head bowed as in genuflection. The floor beneath her is littered with Japanese bladed weapons. In her left hand she holds a katana with the blade pointing toward the floor. Her right hand is obscured as it sits between her thighs. From her back a number of weapons protrude - twelve arrows, and four shuriken. Despite this there are no visible open wounds or blood. The skin on show is unblemished even though the positioning and presence of weapons (including those buried in her skin) indicated she has been involved in some kind of violence. (CI)*

This image like those discussed previously within this chapter is also bloodless in spite of the presence of, and visible employment of, numerous bladed weapons. Additionally, the image does not include any visible aggressors or details regarding her beyond the presence of weapons. Neither does it include reference to support or her team. This positions Psylocke as the only female superhero who is represented as alone in death. The threat of 'dying alone' is often used to coerce women into ascribing to traditional heteronormative gender roles such as marriage and child rearing. Beyond its connection to the conceptions of the 'bad' death (Ko, Kwak, and Nelson-Becker, 2015; Turner and Caswell, 2020) dying alone as it relates to women is represented as an "undesirable state" with "the pejorative stereotypes of the 'cat lady' or 'old maid' are often applied to engender moral panic about the consequences for women of living alone" (Turner and Caswell, 2020:269) and by extension, dying alone (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2017). Furthermore, within contemporary media, dying alone is largely stigmatised (Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2017) and positioned as "a consequence of bad behaviour" (Seale, 2004: 973).

Psylocke is however shown to meet certain gender roles with regards to her appearance, for example, in describing Psylocke, the compositional interpretation states,

*Her face is beautifully made up and unmarked and although her expression is one of sadness rather than pain, anger, or fear, her lips are pouting, and her eyes are hooded. Her hair is worn loose and long, tucked behind her right ear and draped over her left shoulder. She wears a blue one piece that resembles a high-necked swimming costume with opera length finger loop gloves and thigh high boots. This is further accessorised with straps that run around the biceps and thighs and a long flowing red sash around her waist. (CI)*

Here the compositional interpretation notes that while Psylocke has clearly been involved in violent altercations her appearance, particularly her face, hair, and the



front of her body shows little disruption. Her makeup, for example, remains pristine. This suggests that what is important is to represent Psylocke as having undertaken heroic action; it is of equal importance that this is done without detracting from her appearance. Elevating the importance of appearance in this way therefore impacts the kinds of engagement a female superhero can reasonably undertake within the course of superheroic action which in turn limits her capacity for agency and undermines her superheroic status. Furthermore, rather than exhibiting the emotions one would expect from a superhero who has recently emerged from a battle and is shown to be heavily wounded, for example pain, anger, or fear, Psylocke looks sad or resigned. This again suggests the prioritisation of beauty as the facial expression associated with those emotions are not traditionally attractive (Lindeberg, Craig, and Lipp, 2019). The bared teeth associated with both pain and anger for example, do not communicate feminine beauty or grace, and female faces that exhibit them are found to be less attractive (Lindeberg, Craig, and Lipp, 2019). Disallowing female superheroes to communicate emotions for fear it will impact their appearance further indicates how the prioritisation of beauty serves to objectify female characters, stripping them of their agency. When this is applied to female superheroes this functions to undermine their superheroic status and their potential for securing a superheroic death. Notably, while Magik (see fig. 9) is portrayed as displaying an angry facial expression, her costume serves to provoke a body based gaze (Hollet et al, 2022) that directs the audience's gaze towards her body and away from her face, thus negating the impact of the otherwise unattractive angry face.

Participants similarly positioned Psylocke's death as heroic, with those familiar with the character commenting on its narrative validity. Cecilia, for example, claimed that "Psylocke's death is depicted as heroic to me. She's dignified, calm, accepting of her fate as someone who lived a bloody life and knew violence." Similar, Rose stated,

Psylocke's death has that very "action lead at the end of a kung fu flick" to it but it's heroic because she dies in combat, which is a) suited to her role as an x-man and b) suited to her character trait as a self-defined action junkie.

Psylocke runs toward the fight every time--this death is believable for her.  
(Rose)

This was further support by Cecilia who expounded on her earlier comment as follows,

I agree, and I feel like the composition and framing of Psylocke's death here gives the scene a sense of acceptance. From acceptance, I glean agency, because I \*assume\* she walked into this scene knowing there was a chance she was going to die. She was a warrior who accepted death as a part of life, and an inevitable outcome of the path she walked in that life. As someone who used to read a lot of X-Men comics as a kid, and who really liked Psylocke a lot in the 90s, it feels right. (Cecilia)

Here both Rose and Cecilia position Psylocke as possessing agency, categorising the evidence of action contained within the image as superheroic. Furthermore, these responses suggest that this death meets the criteria for the narratively satisfying superheroic death theorised in chapter four and demonstrates that while these kinds of deaths are often positioned as unobtainable by female superheroes, they are achievable in cases where the characters are afforded the agency to engage with the circumstances of their deaths.

While Leighton agreed that the death was heroic, and positions Psylocke as superheroic, they do not feel that this death is necessarily representative of a good death, stating,

I think the image is trying to convey that she fought as hard as she could but died anyway, as a hero though. It doesn't make me feel like she gave up or lost because she was too weak. It definitely isn't an ideal death, feels like despite having fought as hard as she could she may have been in it alone and

outnumbered. The pose reminded me of how Samurai commit suicide. I know she isn't stabbing herself in the image but it seems like a very noble death and coupled with the type of weapons and the pose that's what it reminded me of. (Leighton)

Here Leighton highlights Psylocke's agency as it pertains to superheroic action, noting however that while Psylocke's death may be superheroic, it shares more features with a 'bad' death than 'good'. For example, Psylocke is alone (Turner and Caswell, 2020) and likely in pain (Adesina et al., 2014). Leighton also notes that the death was reminiscent of Seppuku, the ritualised suicide carried out by samurai either to ensure they die with honour rather than fall at the hands of their enemies or to restore honour if they had brought shame upon themselves (Pierre, 2015). Seppuku typically represents an honourable way to die as embracing death in this way "was viewed as affirming a life rooted in ideals of loyalty, duty, honour, and self-sacrifice" (Pierre, 2015: no pagination), characteristics that echo the pro-social mission of the contemporary superhero (Coogan, 2007).

Despite the superheroic nature of Psylocke's death, her superheroic status is diminished through objectification, raised by Hazel who states,

They look like they've been through it. They courted death with their behavior and this is how it ended. I can see they have some kind of agency, but, their agency is almost tailored to make this death more visually pleasing and almost sexy? I mean, it's nice to look at and that gives me pause, because, if you're telling me it's a death - should i think that? (Hazel)

While Hazel does recognise the Psylocke's agency she also questions its function, positioning it as tied to her beauty and lending support to arguments that posit that "agency as an empowered or liberated woman is predicated on being beautiful first, and then being free" (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 100). Hazel also notes the tension

between the image's emphasis on beauty and the morbid contents, highlighting how the image serves to distance the audience from the appropriate emotional response, much like the images found within the genre of 'corpse porn' (Foltyn, 2008b).

Conversely, Sam believes that while the image conveys Psylocke's power it portrays her as having very little agency, arguing,

I think this image paints a picture of a woman with lots of power, but very little agency. She appears to have defeated her enemies but doesn't appear glad or relieved about it. Her face looks tired but not in pain. It seems like she's been in a very long battle, and she's tired. She's covered in mortal wounds, but there's no blood and somehow, she's still up, if not standing. If she is dying/dead, there isn't a feeling of triumph against an enemy (because she's the only character in frame) She may have 'won' but there's no feelings of 'winning' in her pose or expression. It doesn't read as triumphant, but she's also surrounded by fallen weapons. I don't know if I'd call this a 'bad' death but it definitely doesn't feel like a 'good' one. Without context, it looks like she died fighting alone. (Sam)

While Sam continues to situate Psylocke as superheroic with regards to her power, this is undermined by a perceived lack of agency. This lack of agency functions to diminish Psylocke's superheroic status and by extension her superheroic death. Sam also highlights Psylocke's lone status. Due to its connection with contemporary conceptions of the 'bad' death, dying alone tends to be "portrayed as undesirable, creating the perception that when someone does die alone, their death may be termed a failure" (Caswell and O'Connor, 2019: 18). This failure may be linked to "social abandonment" (Klinenberg, 2001: 503) or as previously discussed, "a consequence of bad behaviour" (Seale, 2004: 973), particularly as it relates to the transgression of traditional female roles (Turner and Caswell, 2020). Furthermore, Sam notes the bloodlessness of the image. Other participants similarly made note of the lack of blood within the image, a recurring theme across the dataset. Rose for example described the image as "curiously bloodless for a violent death" clarifying that she's "not bloodthirsty, it's just weird that it involves sharp weapons and there's

no blood.” This was echoed by Sam who stated, “there’s no way someone could have that many wounds and still be ‘up’ but here she is, with not a drop of mortal blood lost (visually)”. Leighton found the lack of blood “confusing” but went on to suggest that,

the red drape is meant to represent [blood] I guess so it’s kind of like theatre or something. It’s an interesting way to depict it. It makes me think it’s mimicking how people portray heroes who have fallen in battle during stage battles using red cloth to symbolize blood being spilled. (Leighton)

Situating the sash as a proxy for blood allows for the suggestion of blood without requiring the image transgress the boundaries of the abject (Kristeva, 1982) and lending further support to Ogden’s (2007) argument that a woman’s bloodshed “must remain hidden” (2007: 118). This additionally allows for the Psylocke to remain beautiful and unblemished in spite of the numerous injuries she is shown to have and serves to support an objectifying male gaze.

By engaging with the sub theme ‘heroic’ as it emerged from the data this section demonstrates how even when a female superhero is granted a superheroic death it is undermined by objectification which functions to prioritise beauty, remove agency, and diminish the superheroic status. Heroic deaths are also positioned as punishments for the female superheroes’ breach of traditional feminine roles.

## 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter argues that the deaths of female superheroes are broadly understood as unheroic and characterised by objectification which serves, in the first instance, to position female superheroes as violable objects lacking agency and autonomy. This in turn functions to strip them of their superheroic status, thus rendering the female superhero both depowered and disempowered and removing their potential for a

superheroic death. This objectification is further demonstrated by the prioritisation of beauty over evidence of heroic action such as visible wounds and the presence of blood which caters to the dominant male gaze (Mulvey, 2009) and seeks to position the female superhero body as objectifiable post-mortem via the necro-gaze (May, 2009). Additionally, this chapter argues that the relinquishing of power is understood by audiences as indicative of passivity and is used to demonstrate weakness. This functions to position the female superheroic as unheroic. Similarly, the failure to overcome an aggressor is also situated as demonstrating weakness which positions the female superhero as less competent than her male counterparts. Furthermore, this chapter argues that when a female superhero is afforded the dignity of a superheroic death, even one deemed narratively satisfying (see chapter four), it is positioned as a punishment for transgressing cultural norms regarding traditional gender roles rather than an honour. As such, the female superheroic death is viewed negatively and is undermined by the continued requirement to appeal to the male gaze. Therefore serving to reinforce cultural views that position women as passive and subordinate to their male counterparts.

# Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the gendering of visual representations of death in contemporary comic books, expanding the links between visual sociology, death studies, and comic book studies. By employing theories of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), objectification (LeMoncheck, 1985; Nussbaum, 1995; Langton, 2009; Cahill, 2011), and the gaze (hooks, 2010; Mulvey, 2009; Pierson, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011) this research was able to consider in depth the significance of how death is gendered and the way this informs and reinforces cultural understandings of power and agency. Via an investigation that centred contemporary comic books as a significant site of enquiry, this thesis engaged with how men and women are represented differently in death through three research questions; the findings of which are presented thematically across three empirical chapters, which make use of data collected across digital focus groups and compositional interpretations in response to the following research questions,

- I. What is the significance of death in comic books?
- II. Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?
- III. How do these gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?

This thesis locates itself within the intersections of the fields of sociology, death studies, and comics studies, as made evident within the Literature review (see chapter two). Here, engagement with literature as it pertained to these fields allowed for the identification of gaps within existing research. This highlighted the significance of the comic book cover as a site of interest within research that has largely been neglected and reveals that while scholars have identified that

superheroes die “more frequently on covers that they do within interior pages” (Cook, 2015: 18), there has been no investigation into the significance of these representations. Additionally, while the significance of gender as a signifier within comics (Bongco, 1999: Baker and Raney, 2007) has been discussed, there has been no engagement with regards to representations of death, nor with how these representations may be said to inform or reinforce cultural views on masculinity and femininity. In identifying these gaps in academic literature, this thesis has been situated to be both relevant to existing debates and as an original piece of scholarship that interrogates these omissions.

The key arguments and contributions of this thesis are illustrated across three sections. Firstly, through the thesis’s *Contribution to knowledge*, which will highlight the key arguments and findings of the analysis chapters and how this answers the research questions. This will be followed by *Contribution to the field*, which situates the thesis within the wider fields of visual sociology and death studies, demonstrating its theoretical and methodological contributions. Finally, section three, *Study limitations and directions for future research* reflects on the research and considers next steps.

## 7.1 Contributions to Knowledge

This thesis has been used to reveal and argue that the significance of death in popular culture is characterised by both its narrative function and its role in reinforcing heteronormative gender differences. Moreover, it has been proposed that the deaths of male and female superheroes are represented differently. The differences being that the deaths of male superheroes are broadly positioned as superheroic and narratively satisfying, whereas the deaths of female superheroes are largely characterised by objectification and situated as a product of passivity and weakness.



### 7.1.1 Memorable Deaths, and the Role of Narrative

The first of three analytic chapters, *Memorable deaths, and the role of narrative* is primarily concerned with addressing the following research question:

- I. What is the significance of death in comic books?

By addressing the role of narrative as it informs the ways in which contemporary representations of death are mediated through comic books and received by audiences, this chapter analysed accounts of death found within comic books and popular media as chosen by participants that have stood out as memorable and the significance of these memorable examples. In addition to highlighting participant assertions regarding the importance of narrative when engaging with, and rationalising these, representations, this chapter identifies recurrent acknowledgments of differences in how men, women, and people of marginalised genders are represented in death.

The central argument to the chapter is that participants understand the prevalence of death in contemporary comics that sit within the superhero genre as being linked to its narrative function. Death in these instances is a tool used to quickly and easily move the story forward, create tension, or provoke an emotional response without having to rely on lengthy exposition. Additionally, deaths are often impermanent, so consequences are both temporary and, therefore, insignificant in the long term. As a result of this, participants find that the deaths themselves often lack significance as the narrative shifts meaning away from the death in order to focus on its consequences for another character. As such, death in these instances is not engaged with as a meaningful event.

Additionally, this chapter argues that the deaths that occur specifically as a narrative device in the service of another character, disproportionately feature women and

marginalised people, therefore positioning these deaths as lacking narrative centrality, and representing women in death as disposable, objectified, or victims. As a result, this then prioritises the stories of straight, white, cisgender men. In contrast, men's deaths are more likely to be considered to be both heroic and central to the narrative. As such, this chapter argues that the deaths of men, unlike those of their female counterparts, are more likely to be considered both heroic and narratively important. That is to say, male deaths are infrequently utilised as narrative tools, for example to expedite a plot, or motivate a response from another character. Instead, their deaths are essential to the narrative often with the plot revolving around it. This allows for the deaths of women to be constructed in opposition and as such frames them as unheroic.

Furthermore, this chapter reveals that participants understand 'good' and 'bad' death as they relate to fictional deaths in terms of narrative satisfaction. This prioritises the role of narrative and its ability to convey meaning and significance over the physical and social aspects of death. Participants also consider a heroic death to be a discrete category, that is separate from their understandings of 'good' and 'bad' and predominantly describes the motivations that lead to death. Consequently, this chapter argues that participants, when discussing death as it occurs in real life, position agency as it relates to dignity and choice as a key factor in categorising a death as 'good'. Additionally, 'bad' deaths are those that lack agency and are unable to be made sense of narratively.

Accordingly, there is a need for the creation of new typologies to be utilised when discussing the deaths of superheroes as they occur within comic books. Firstly, is the superheroic death, this is a death that occurs in the line of agentic superheroic action, for example a self-sacrificing death. This death can be either 'good' or 'bad' in conventional terms, however, this designation does not convey the impact or significance of the death, but rather what motivated the death. Impact or significance is measured through narrative satisfaction. Therefore, a narratively satisfying heroic death will be considered synonymous with a good or ideal death and a narratively unsatisfying heroic death will be considered to align with a bad death.

As a result of the findings in the chapter the first thesis research question is answered by the significance of death in popular culture being less to do with death as it functions as a narrative device. Instead, it serves to foreground otherwise unspoken differences between men and women. Death in these instances is used as a vehicle to transmit a final impression of a character essence. However, these impressions have been shown to be linked to cultural markers of a character's gender, positioning women as weaker, and lacking in agency whereas men are presented as strong and empowered.

### 7.1.2 Superheroes, Masculinity, and Death

The second of three analytic chapters, *Superheroes, masculinity, and death* sought to address the following questions,

- I. Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?
- II. How do these gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?

Building on the initial findings of *Memorable deaths, and the role of narrative*, this chapter expanded and developed the assertion that there is an identifiable difference in the types of deaths afforded to men and women within popular culture. As such, this chapter analysed participant responses to visual representations of the male superheroic death alongside a compositional interpretation and analysis. By focusing on the ways that men are depicted within the dataset, the analysis in this chapter discerned the hierarchical nature of the male superheroic death and highlights the kinds of differences identified by participants in *Memorable deaths, and the role of narrative*.

This chapter revealed that superheroic masculinity and, by extension, the superheroic death, are underpinned by hegemonic masculinity. As such the hierarchical framework proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) has been utilised to better understand how the superheroic death narrative is constructed and applied by participants. Within this framework, the deaths of male superheroes are broadly understood as superheroic with participants positioning male superheroes as agentic subjects characterised by demonstrations of heroic action and strength. This is most visible in the deaths of white, able bodied characters whose deaths are typically represented as the marker of their heroism. Furthermore, while the hegemonic heroic ideal tends to prioritise heavy musculature or demonstrations of physical strength to visually denote a heroic figure, this can be substituted for examples of moral or personal strength. This is used most frequently as a means to situate marginalised masculinities as complicit to the hegemonic ideal and as such it can be argued that the marginalisations of age and disability do not prevent men from achieving superheroic deaths. Rather, these marginalisation's provide additional opportunities for superheroes to demonstrate these alternative forms of strength via the overcoming of said marginalisation's. However, positioning marginalisation's as something that can be overcome in death further reinforces the marginalisation's as inferior and proximity to hegemonic ideals as necessary to achieve a heroic death.

Furthermore, this chapter revealed that the deaths of superheroes whose expression of masculinity is categorised as subordinate or deviant due to factors such as race or proximity to femininity were broadly considered to be undignified and lacking in agency. Rather than demonstrating complicity to the superheroic hegemonic ideal, these deaths function to reinforce these superheroes' subordinate status and further position their deviancy as inferior. This in turn leads to the removal of agency, which prevents these characters from being seen to be acting superheroically and as such precludes them from achieving a superheroic death. This further demonstrates how death is used to affirm and assert the dominant position of superheroic hegemonic masculinities by only affording a superheroic death to characters who either exhibit hegemonic masculinity or can be understood as complicit.

An additional finding is in the absence of a clear narrative participants are willing and able to construct a narrative that allows for a broader understanding. In addressing these narratives, it is evidenced that even when participants are made aware of the characters death, they continue to construct narratives that prioritise victory. This suggests that participants consider these deaths as improbable therefore situating the characters narratively as too important to die.

Therefore, this chapter argues that representations of the deaths of superheroes are gendered. However, the findings presented within this chapter show the matter to be far more complex than a simple male/female binary might suggest. This is reflected in the findings that highlight the ways that the deaths of male superheroes are in themselves constructed in line with the hierarchies established by hegemonic masculinity and do not represent a singular male typology. Through aligning the idealised masculinity of contemporary superheroes with hegemonic masculinity the analysis identifies how the kinds of deaths afforded to men functions to further reinforce these hierarchies and prioritise the superheroic narrative of certain types of men. Furthermore these representation serve to reinforce the frameworks established by hegemonic masculinity that prioritise heteronormative cultural views regarding power and agency through the subordination of deviant masculinities and women.

### 7.1.3 Superheroes, Femininity, and Death

Sitting parallel to *Superheroes, masculinity, and death* through its focus on femininity this third analysis chapter also addresses the second and third research questions:

- I. Are representations of the deaths of superheroes gendered?

II. How do these gendered representations of death reinforce cultural views of power and agency?

Expanding upon the finding presented in *Superheroes, masculinity, and death* and supported by theories concerning objectification (LeMoncheck, 1985; Nussbaum, 1995; Langton, 2009; Cahill, 2011), and the gaze (hooks, 2010; Mulvey, 2009; Pierson, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011), this chapter provided equal space to discuss femininities alongside masculinities without the necessity of immediate comparison. Further expanding on the assertion that there is a discernible difference in the types of death afforded to men and women, this chapter engages representations of the deaths of female superheroes, analysing participant responses alongside a compositional interpretation and analysis. By focusing on the ways that women are depicted within the dataset, this chapter was able to further elucidate the kinds of differences highlighted by participants in *Memorable deaths, and the role of narrative*.

This chapter argues that the deaths of female superheroes are characterised by objectification. This objectification functions to deny female superheroes their superheroic status by situating them as violable sexual objects and undermining their capacity for agency and autonomy. This in turn situates the female superhero as both depowered and disempowered, thus rendering them unable to achieve a superheroic death. This objectification is most visible through the prioritisation of beauty, in particular a beauty that corresponds with a Eurocentric ideal, over evidence of heroic actions such as visible wounds or the presence of blood. The absence of blood in these cases contradicts Seltzer's (2008) conceptualisation of wound culture and instead reinforces Kristeva's (1982) abjection. Furthermore, the preservation of the female superheroic body in death further seeks to cater to a dominant male gaze and situates the female superhero body as objectifiable post mortem via the necro-gaze.

Additionally, this chapter argues that the deaths of female superheroes serve to position female superheroes as weak and submissive, therefore reinforcing cultural views that women are less capable than their male counterparts. This is demonstrated through representations of the female superhero as subdued or overpowered. This also serves to reinforce cultural views that position women as passive. Furthermore, this chapter argues that when a female superhero is afforded a superheroic death it is perceived differently to her male counterparts. Rather than being tied to a heroic victory it is characterised by struggle and defeat and positioned as a punishment for transgressing cultural norms, rather than an honour. As such, the female superheroic death is viewed negatively and further undermined by the continued requirement to appeal to the male gaze.

This chapter therefore further serves to support the argument that visual representations of the deaths of superheroes are indeed gendered and that the differences tied to these representations function to reinforce outdated heteronormative stereotypes regarding both masculinity and femininity. Demonstrated here through the objectification and subordination of women in death and is most evident through the prioritisation of western Eurocentric beauty over displays of superheroic action, and the positioning of women as passive, and therefore lacking agency.

## 7.2 Contributions to the Field

In addition to the scholarly contributions detailed in the previous section this thesis has also made a number of contributions to the academic fields in which it is located. As such this section will address the contributions of the thesis to the fields of visual sociology (7.2.1), death studies (7.2.2), and comic book studies (7.2.3).

### 7.2.1 Visual Sociology

This thesis can be seen to contribute to the field of visual sociology in the first instance through the creation and implementation of a novel mixed method and interdisciplinary approach to data collection, through the utilisation of a framework adopted and adapted from compositional interpretation; a method most frequently employed within art history. Integrating this method alongside photo elicitation allowed for a thorough engagement with the images contents prior to participant led data collection. Additionally, this thesis shows how sociology can accommodate the analysis of pre-existing visual data and imagery rather than that which has been specifically created for the purpose of research as is usually favoured within visual sociology (Walker and Chaplin, 1997: Harper, 2012), most notably within this research the comic book cover. As such, this thesis argued for the significance of the comic book cover, an otherwise under researched area of popular culture, as a source of data and significant site of enquiry. Approaching the use of comic book cover as data from the perspective of Rose (2016) who asks that researcher: “i) take images seriously; ii) think about the social conditions and effects of images and their modes of distribution, and; iii) consider one's own way of looking at images” (2016: 32); this thesis positions the comic book cover as worthy of academic scrutiny. Furthermore, by engaging with the comic book cover, this thesis presents a means for addressing pre-existing imagery, particularly that which originates from popular culture within the field of sociology, arguing for its significance whilst providing guidelines for future researchers who seek to forefront the visual as data within their scholarship. Moreover, this thesis highlights the significance of visibility and the gaze in creating, maintaining, and reinforcing structures of power particularly as they relate to gender.

Additionally, this thesis also serves to demonstrate the continued utility of theories of derivatization (Cahill, 2011) and objectification (LeMoncheck, 1985: Nussbaum, 1995: Langton, 2009), both products of the gaze. While it was my initial intention to apply the concept of derivatization (Cahill, 2011) to both the male and female superhero, the concept proved most useful when discussing expressions of masculinity as they aligned with hegemonic ideals, ideals which are themselves a form of derivatization. Conversely, when engaging with the data gathered from participants regarding the images that featured women it was the concept of objectification that was raised most frequently so it would have been remiss of me to



disregard the participants own observations and feelings to focus instead on a parallel concept that did not match their experiences. However one could argue that objectification itself can be understood as a facet or product of derivatization particularly as it relates to the derivatized superhero more broadly as female characters are designed in line with the derivatizing subject's, that is both the creator and the audience's, desires.

Furthermore, contributions to the field are made evident by the use of synchronous digital focus groups which allowed for this thesis to capitalise on the zeitgeist proposed by Resha (2019), which positioned the comics community as increasing online. Utilising the synchronous online focus group allowed for the research to mimic the online spaces currently populated by members of the comics community, thus creating a familiar setting from which to host discussions. Furthermore, the utilisation of online focus groups encouraged participants to use the modes of language associated with these spaces over more formal means of speech and gesture, for example the use of capitalization to communicate emphasis and punctuation to denote pauses and hesitation within their answers. While not the focus of this research, this highlighted the benefits of the online focus group and its capacity to stimulate natural conversations particularly amongst digital natives. Furthermore, the use of digital focus groups allowed for the continuation of data collection during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 7.2.2 Death Studies

To the field of death studies, this thesis has contributed to the growing but underdeveloped area of scholarship that focuses on the role of fiction and popular culture. By drawing focus towards how death is mediated through popular culture, this thesis reveals the significance of death as a means for communicating cultural views and norms and reinforces arguments that position narrative as a key component in making sense of death. Furthermore, this research brings a sociological lens to discussions regarding visual representations of death, broadening the scope of the field and highlighting the utility of interdisciplinary scholarship to create novel avenues of research.

Additionally, this thesis has reframed discussions regarding visual representations of death, foregrounding gender as a site for reinforcing cultural views of power and agency. The work builds upon existing theories regarding the gaze (hooks, 2010; Mulvey, 2009; Pierson, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011), particularly as they relate to the female corpse (Pierson, 2010, Penfold-Mounce, 2015, May, 2009). Additionally, this thesis has taken steps to address visual representations of the male corpse, a frequently under-examined source of data within visual research concerning death (Alaniz, 2014). Furthermore, this research demonstrates how masculinity functions in both communicating and reinforcing cultural views regarding power and agency, rather than situating masculinity as a neutral site from which femininity is understood as other.

The focus on visual representations has also opened death studies to the integration of the comic book and more specifically the comic book cover as a source of data. Thus, building upon death studies previous scholarly engagements with popular culture and extending it into an under researched area. This thesis also builds on previous scholarship that foregrounds the importance of gender as signifiers within comic books and reveals a link between this and research that highlights the prevalence of death but not what it can signify or communicate.

Furthermore, through an engagement with contemporary conceptions of the 'good' and 'bad' in relation to the kinds of deaths experienced within comic books this thesis has proposed the creation of new typologies to be applied to the superheroic death. Thus, expanding the kinds of conversations academics can have when discussing the deaths that occur within comics books and specifically within the superhero genre.

### 7.2.3 Comic Book Studies

The thesis contributes to the larger body of scholarship that considers the cultural relevance and impact of gender in comic books. Building upon assertions that position superhero masculinity as synonymous with hegemonic masculinity (Brown, 2021; Johnson, 2014) and supporting arguments that frame the representation of women as the product of an objectifying male gaze (Cocca, 2014), this thesis demonstrates how these ideas are reproduced and reinforced through visual representation of deaths.

Additionally, this research highlights the importance of the fan-scholar and the significance of researchers bringing themselves and their interests into their research. For example, it was through my own position as both a fan and a critic that I was able to source participants and converse with them on their own terms in familiar online spaces with topics that are prominent within the comics community at large and the comics criticism specifically. Thus, challenging Sholle's (1991) argument that there is "a danger of taking up the standpoint of a fan" and bringing further support to Jenkins (1992: 7) position that "demonstrating one's own commitment and participation in that community allows a researcher to gain trust".

Furthermore, by taking up the standpoint of fan, or acafan (Hills, 2005) as it may be, I was able to engage with an area of research I care deeply about, not just as an academic who had identified a gap in existing research, but as a fan of the thing I was studying, as a person deeply engaged in this community. Personally, it was this deep connection to the subject matter that helped motivate me in difficult times and helped me understand why my work was important to myself, the comic book fan community, and academia more broadly. There is of course the risk that by the end of a project a person is more scholar than fan as they spend more time engaging with these works from an academic standpoint. One's findings might also change this position, especially if they speak to negative outcomes. For example it is difficult not to look at the mainstream comic book industry with some level of pessimism, a pessimism that was shared by participants, as a result of this research. However this research also highlights the number of women and people of marginalised genders

engaged within these spaces, many of who seek and have seen both progress and change.

Broadly, this thesis highlights the benefits of interdisciplinary approaches and demonstrates how visual sociology, death studies, and comic book studies can intersect to create novel scholarship. Moreover, this research has addressed the gap identified within the literature review (see chapter two) which highlighted the paucity of scholarship regarding the significance of death within popular culture; the gendered nature of representations of death as they occur on comic book covers; and the ways in which these gendered representations can reinforce cultural views of power and agency.

### 7.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this thesis has worked to create links between sociology, death studies, and comics studies, the scope of the research was limited not only by the restraints of the research design but also by the availability of materials from which to launch an analysis. As such, there are many avenues of inquiry that, while equally significant, this thesis has been unable to approach. Most notable is the absence of consideration and analysis of the deaths of those of marginalised genders. Due to the nature of contemporary mainstream superhero comic books at the time of conducting this research, this was not possible. Alongside this, I believe a similar project could be launched that allows for a far greater analysis of other social marginalisation's such as race, ethnicity, and ability. While issues of inclusion are at the forefront of many conversations regarding popular culture, we are not yet at a point where that inclusion is consistent or comparable and as demonstrated in this research inclusion often marks an exception rather than a rule.

Initially this thesis planned to engage with professionals within the comic book industry - for example, artists, writers, and editors via a series of in depth interviews -

however, this line of enquiry was eliminated in favour of focusing on audience responses. Future research would allow for the reintroduction of the strand of investigation and for the analysis of the relationship between a creator's intention and the audience response. Furthermore, this thesis' focus on the responses of audiences emphasised the voices of women and minority genders and therefore, future research could be approached with the intention of highlighting alternative voices, for example the perspectives of male fans, queer fans, or fans from different age groups. The compositions of these focus groups could also be altered - for example, this study could be reproduced with the intention of addressing people with a greater or lesser knowledge of contemporary comic books and the superhero genre. Additionally, an increase in the number of focus groups for example would allow for the collection of a far larger pool of data from which to derive analysis.

A number of limitations were also identified with regards to the data set. While this thesis intended to engage with two comparative datasets drawn from different publishers, this was not feasible due to a lack of a suitable alternative. However, future research could expand the data set to include images produced by other publishers and position them as broadly indicative of mainstream western comics. There could also be a consideration of images produced during different eras of the superhero genre for example the silver, and golden age. This would allow for a point of comparison and for a historical perspective on changing cultural norms. Beyond this I believe there is much to learn from those who create works beyond the mainstream, but also outside the superhero genre with further consideration for children's picture books. Similar considerations could also be applied cross-culturally, with attention being given to manga, bandes dessinée, or manhwa, for example, whether as a sole area of study or in comparison. Similarly, this research could be extended to consider the deaths found within comic book interiors in addition to comic book covers, which would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the role of narrative in audience understanding. This work also does not need to be bound to the superhero genre; while it may not be possible to apply the model of the narratively satisfying superheroic death to other genres, the concept of narrative satisfaction is adaptable and applicable to other deaths found within fiction. Additionally, this study could easily be adapted to consider the visual representations

found in other areas of popular culture, filmic representations of death, for example. This could then be applied cross culturally and across different genres, to produce further analysis.

## 7.4 Conclusion

The heart of the contribution of this research has been its investigation into visual representations of death in comic books. It has been revealed that comic books do little to challenge cultural views of power and agency, but instead function to reinforce them as they function to celebrate problematic conceptions of both masculinity and femininity. Prioritising unobtainable forms of masculinity and punishing those unable or unwilling to aspire towards it while simultaneously stripping women of the agency necessary to achieve a superheroic death. This in turn speaks to wider concerns with heteronormativity in media, and therefore the culture in which said media is produced and consumed. This is further evidenced by the kinds of people that are excluded, or included in a manner that suggest their presence is more than an exception. Most notably Black people, indigenous people, and other people of colour, transgender people, disabled people, and people with different body types. To this end, the primary contribution of this thesis is that although visual representations of death within comic books may seem both ubiquitous and unremarkable, it is their presence which serves to reflect and reinforce cultural understandings of gender, power, and agency.

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## Comic Book Covers

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Spencer, N. (w) and Frison, J. (ca), 2015. *The Astonishing Ant-Man*. Issue 10 (Frison Death of X Variant), 20 July 2016. New York: Marvel

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# Appendix

## Appendix One: Research Information Sheet

My name is Kelly Richards D’Arcy-Reed and I am currently undertaking a research project for my PhD with the University of York supervised by Drs Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Clare Jackson.

Due to your interest in the area of my research you are invited to participate however, before you decide, it is important that you are fully informed about the project, your rights, and what your contribution will entail.

### **About The Project**

This research intends to examine representations of death in contemporary comic books by attempting to answer the following research questions.

- Is there a difference between the ways that men and women’s deaths are portrayed in comic books and can theories regarding good and bad deaths be applied to them?
- How do the representations of these deaths reproduce cultural views of men and women and their competency and agency?
- What meanings do these representations have for readers?

### **What will happen if I take part?**

If you choose to take part in this research you will be invited to contribute to an informal digital focus group of 3 people via online fora e.g. Google Docs. This should

last no longer than 90 minutes. During the focus groups, we will discuss your thoughts regarding the concept of 'good' and 'bad' deaths, and your responses to a selection of images showing scenes of death and dying sourced from contemporary comic books along with your involvement within the comics community.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and as such you are free to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw entirely without stating a reason for your decision. Once the focus group begins you are free to withdraw but your contributions will remain on record due to the nature of group discussions. Any responses will, however, be anonymised and should they be used in the final submission or any future research activities, the researcher will not use any identifying features.

Please be aware that some of the images I present may be particularly troubling due to their depiction of gendered or graphic violence. If you wish to see examples of the images we will be discussing prior to making your decision to participate please contact Kelly Richards D'Arcy-Reed.

### **What is going to happen to the information?**

Anonymity will be offered to all participants. The research will utilise pseudonyms but will not divulge any identifying features in relation to direct quotations. In addition, all focus groups participants will be asked to respect the anonymity of their fellow participants both during and following the focus group.

### **Who is going to be conducting this research?**

This study is based in the Department of Sociology at the University of York and is being conducted by Kelly Richards D'Arcy-Reed (a PhD researcher). This research

is being supervised by Drs Ruth Penfold-Mounce and Clare Jackson (Senior Lecturers, Department of Sociology).

### **Contact details**

If you would like to talk about any aspect of the project or you wish to participate in the research please get in touch using the contact details below:

#### **Researcher:**

Kelly Richards D'Arcy-Reed

kdar500@york.ac.uk

#### **Supervisors:**

Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce

ruth.penfold-mounce@york.ac.uk

Dr Clare Jackson

clare.jackson@york.ac.uk

#### **Ethics Committee Chair:**

Professor Tony Royle (ELMPS Chair)

elmeps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk

#### **Address:**

Department of Sociology, Wentworth College

University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5DD

**Support lines:**

The Samaritans: 116 123

Nightline, University of York: 01904 323735

Independent Domestic Abuse Support: 03000 110 110

Cruse Bereavement: 0808 808 1677

Victim Support: 0808 168 9111



## Appendix Two: Consent Form

### Informed Consent

Having been approached by the researcher, Kelly Richards D'Arcy-Reed, I, hereby confirm the following information

\* Required

1. I have read and understand the information provided on the Research Information sheet. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

2. I understand that during the research I will be exposed to images and discussion of death and violence. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

3. I am aware that I can contact the researcher at any time with any questions, queries, or concerns I have with the research. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

4. I understand that it is my right to withdraw from this study at any point up until I have participated in a focus group. Once the focus group begins I am free to withdraw but my contributions will remain on record due to the nature of group discussions. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

5. I understand that it is my decision as a participant to only share information I wish to, and that I will be under no pressure to share information I am uncomfortable with disclosing. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

6. I understand that all information provided for the purposes of this study will remain anonymous during the production of this study and no identifying markers will be used. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

7. I understand that the data which I have provided during this research project will be recorded and held electronically on an encrypted drive for a period of up to ten years. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

8. I understand that the data which I provide during this study will be used for the purposes of the researcher's PhD study and any future research activity deemed suitable by the researcher. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

9. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project and, as such, agree to sign and date this informed consent form. \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes  
 No

#### Demographic Information

While you are free to opt out of answering any or all of the following questions, please consider completing the following demographic questionnaire. The data collected will be used for research purposes only.

10. Name

---

11. Date of birth

*Example: January 7, 2019*

---

12. Gender

---

13. Pronouns

---

14. Sexuality

---

15. Ethnicity

---

16. Race

---

**Consent**

17. By signing below, I confirm that I agree to participate in this research project \*

---

18. Date \*

---

*Example: January 7, 2019*

---

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Google Forms

## Appendix Three: Semi-Structured Schedule

### **Focus group schedule**

Check they have read the info sheet and signed a consent form.

Brief on format and subjects to be covered.

We are going to be looking at 2 covers from the 2016 Death of X event. These were variant covers featured across the catalogue and the characters and situations on the covers do not necessarily relate to the content of the comic

### **Ice breaker**

Fave comics/characters

- Length of fandom

### **Questions**

- Death is not an uncommon event in comics, why do you think this is?
- In your experience, how do you feel that representations (images) of death are handled in comics? (differences between men/women? Heroes/civilians/villains)
- Do any particular examples of either come to mind? (These can be from comics or other media)
- How would you define a good/dignified/heroic and a bad/undignified death?

\*share images\*

- What are your initial thoughts/feelings? What do you like/dislike?

\*highlight 1st image\*

- Focusing on this image - what do you think this is trying to convey (about the character and their agency/ability/power)
- Thinking back on your definitions re:death where does this sit?
- Does it make you want to know more about this comic or character?

\*moving to 2nd image\*

- Focusing on this image - what do you think this is trying to convey (about the character and their agency/ability/power)
  - Thinking back on your definitions re:death where does this sit?
  - Does it make you want to know more about this comic or character?
  - How do you think the images compare?
- 
- In light of this discussion have your opinions changed at all re: representations of death, particularly the deaths of women are handled in comics?

Thank you for your time and input