Superheroes, identity, and the internet: Feeling the self as product in the age of networked neoliberalism

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Abstract

Using the close-reading of case studies, this thesis argues that the dominance of the superhero genre from 2008 to 2020 was due to its aptness for comprehending the feelings of the process of self production being made so visible and tangible through the affordances of the web.

This thesis contributes to both superhero studies and internet studies. Superhero studies literature has given little attention to the advent of social media as a specific cultural phenomenon, despite previous work looking at the genre as responsive to cultural anxieties. Internet studies have looked at individual and collective user practice and structures of the web, but have not looked at the feelings brought about by these affordances and their expression in other cultural artefacts. The first chapter explores the expression of self in image, a primary feature of online avatar creation and image sharing. Using Tania Bucher's extension of Foucault's regime visibility, this chapter uses Marvel's *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) to demonstrate the evolution of a response to the agential affordances of self-representation online. The second chapter looks at the archival features of the web, and their capture of images and performances of self as they happen. This chapter examines *Jessica Jones*' (2015-2019) representation of affectual rupturing of the self as an expression of anxieties around the visibility of the process of self performance and its consequent vulnerability. The third chapter extends the focus to archive's corporate complement, data, and the challenges it presents to the self in its replication of user's desires and behaviours. The fourth chapter uses HBO's *Watchmen* (2019) to make the thesis' most significant contribution; that the language of trauma is used as a way to legitimise the self and this discourse is at risk of manipulation by dominant identity group.

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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.

The recently released *Superheroes and Digital Perspectives: Super Data* (Young and McCreery 2024) contains a single-authored chapter that I have written and co-authored introduction. No text was taken from the thesis to complete this chapter. However, the contents and topic of the single-authored chapter draw from the close reading I undertook of HBO’s *Westworld* (2016-2022) for this thesis.

A similar chapter was presented for publication for the upcoming Super Cultures book series (Eds. Danny Graydon and Torsten Caeners. Bristol, UK: Intellect Books) but I made the choice to withdraw my chapter in the book following a family emergency.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The journey to this thesis topic was driven by a personal interest in exploring the notions of self and time. However, it was through observing a disparity in post-2008 media that the ideas for this thesis began to take shape. Specifically, I noticed a shift in the prioritisation of mental and emotional health over the exploration of physical harm. In the superhero genre, which was prevalent on screens both big and small in the US and UK at the time, characters were depicted grappling with their emotions and mental health following a specific event, while physical conditioning was often condensed into montage sequences.

This focus on emotional suffering and the portrayal of characters dealing with their emotions intrigued me, as it seemed to be reflected in other forms of visual media as well. Even charity advertising campaigns shifted their emphasis from depicting the suffering of people in other countries to advocating for access to education and opportunities, emphasising aspirational ideas of achievement rather than the pain and suffering that charities aimed to alleviate.

Furthermore, in news media and popular mainstream discussions, conversations about anxiety, mental health, and well-being seemed to dominate the discourse. There was an institutional dimension to this discussion, with differing views on how to address the rising prevalence of anxiety ranging from personal methods like meditation and exercise to the responsibility of workplaces and governments to provide mental health support.

I was compelled to investigate why this particular interest had emerged during this time period. By understanding the underlying causes, I hoped to uncover potential solutions to the crisis of mental health that appeared to have taken hold. However, the thesis morphed as I investigated further.

As it stands now, this thesis proposes that the superhero became a figure through which to work through and comprehend the effects of social and networked media on the conceptualisation of self from 2008 to 2020. The thesis close reads selected case studies from the time period that position aspects of networked media, such as image, digital

archives, data harvesting and anonymity, as primary concerns within their narratives. This allows for an exploration of how the superhero genre represented then-contemporary relationships with networked media and how their presentation of superhero selves suggest the potential for networked technology to produce posthuman selves.

The following sections will introduce the context in which the 2008-2020 wave of superhero genre products was emerging, including the rise of social media, as well as the history of the superhero genre that this wave was another evolution for. The thesis' primary research questions and layout will then be described.

Superheroes, the iPhone, and the global financial crisis: 2008, a triptych

In 2008, several significant events occurred, shaping the cultural landscape and setting the stage for the exploration undertaken in this thesis. These events include the global financial crisis, the rise of the superhero genre, and the release of the iPhone, along with the expansion of ubiquitous technology and social media.

Whilst some of these changes took place at a global scale, such as the global financial crisis, the impacts and responses to these trends are necessarily different in different cultural and national contexts. Due to the author's familiarity with UK and US culture, and the national context of production for the case studies being the US, the ideas and conclusions drawn from the analysis conducted in this thesis is applicable to a US context only. Moreover, the inequity of access to the internet and networked technologies over the 2008-2020 period could be considered to have impacted the outcomes of the media and internet studies which this thesis uses as a frame for reference for the experience of the users of networked technology.

As an example, a study on iPhone usage found that groups from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent more money on apps and, crucially, rated the usability of the iPhone as poorly in comparison to users from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Rahmati et al. 2012). This means that whilst these may have been the most prevalent experiences of

networked technology in the period, they certainly were not the only possible experiences and as such represent only the most prevalent interactions rather than a comprehensive understanding of the full range of possible digital experiences.

The superhero genre has long been recognised for its ability to respond thematically to cultural anxieties, often addressing threats to national identity (Ormrod, Huxley, and Gibson 2014). In the earlier stages of the genre, superheroes like Captain America symbolised America's fight against Nazis during World War II (Dittmer 2005), while later storylines focused on the Cold War and nuclear disasters (Genter 2007; Maguire 2012). The genre also represented minority movements, such as the X-Men as an allegory for acceptance of gay and queer individuals (Lecker 2007). More recent storylines have tackled issues of representation for Black and ethnic minorities, as well as queer communities, while continuing to address national security threats.

The superhero genre has a much longer history than the selected time period. The genre began in comic books, a format that itself had grown out of magazines' comic strips in the late 1800s. Pulp magazines (cheap action, fantasy, and suspense stories) influenced the stories being told in comic strips, with pulp heroes appearing in comic strips in the 1920s (Wright 2001, pg 2). The superhero genre is differentiated from heroic action stories largely through costuming elements, the superhero's civilian persona's integration with everyday life, and of course, superpowers. As Haslem, Ndalianis, and Mackie 2007 point out, these superpowers generally stem from human or scientific origin, rather than the divine powers of gods that heroes are historically associated with (2007).

As comic books developed into creating original stories, the industry would take a while to become established. Will Eisner, an early American cartoonist who started his career in the 1940s, described the comic book industry as an "artistic ghetto" as cartoonists came into pulp comic book publishing to make their name (Will Eisner quoted in Wright 2001, pg 7). These cartoonists included Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster whose now famous Superman first appeared in 1938 for *Detective Comics'* new line of *Action Comics*. The outsider perspective of a fledgling industry coupled with the authors' Jewish heritage has been seen as a primary component of the creation of the superhero genre, with the superhero typically

occupying multiple identities and/or value systems that they must oscillate between to maintain their integration into American culture (Fingeroth 2004).

It is Superman that is often referred to as the first superhero. However, the first superhero film could be argued to predate superhero comic books. For example, the renowned comic book author Alan Moore suggested that the first American superhero film is possibly *The Birth of a Nation*, a 1915 silent film featuring masked and costumed vigilantes belonging to the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) (Alan Moore 2019). This film is also referred to as the "most racist film ever made" due to its portrayal of Black people as aggressive and unintelligent, and the KKK as heroic white saviours (Rampell 2015). The superhero genre's continued involvement with aspects of identity including race has been noted by scholars and fans alike (e.g. Namu 2011).

Whilst this thesis focuses on the period 2008-2020, superhero comic books received adaptations much earlier. For example, multiple television series featuring "caped crusaders" were released throughout the 1960s to 1980s. Landmark film adaptations Superman (1978) and Batman (1989) had remarkable commercial success but apart from their own franchises, continued to stand alone. As McSweeney notes, they failed to "inspire the did not inspire the wave of additions to the genre the likes of which we have experienced since the turn of the millennium" (2020, pg. 3).

The period 2000-2008 marked a turning point in the superhero genre's popularity. The release of Singer's *X-Men* in 2000 marked not only the most commercially successful superhero film to date, it also became the highest grossing non-sequel film of the time (UPI 2000, Gray 2002). The success of *X-Men* was rapidly followed by Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man trilogy* and Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* which continued to break worldwide grossing records for the genre. The consequent commercially successful and frequent release of other adaptations, sequels, and original superhero tales such as *The Incredibles* (2004) over the next decade would lead to the genre being considered "the undeniably dominant film genre" (Brown 2016, pg. 1).

The 2000-2008 success of the superhero genre has been attributed to cultural fallout from the 9/11 Twin Towers terror attack (Pheasant-Kelly 2013, Burke 2015, Packer 2009). In the

film industry this view has been expressed by such people as Jon Favreau, *Iron Man* director and actor, who put the audience's need for “emotional simplicity [and] escapism” down to the effect of 9/11. Some critics have, however, disagreed with such an assumption of linear causation, with David Bordwell and Liam Burke, for example, questioning the uncritical application of the explanation of superheroes following a 9/11 zeitgeist (Burke 2015, pg. 24).

Whilst the contemporary prevalence of the superhero genre may not be definitely argued to be a direct response to the 9/11 terror attack, it is undeniable that the events of 2001 and the continuing war influenced the production of the genre in the 2000s. For example, Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man*’s trailer and posters were recalled due to the prominence of the Twin Towers in them, emphasising Spider-Man’s travel around the heights of New York (Brooks 2023). Other superhero releases, like *The Dark Knight,* featured hostage situations and buildings being blown up. *Iron Man* (2008) was perhaps most explicitly focused on terrorist threats, using the setting of Afghanistan for Tony Stark’s kidnap by a terrorist organisation and his creation of the first Iron Man suit.

Whilst the superhero genre has been noted throughout its history to address and explore cultural anxieties and national threats such as Nazism and the Cold War (Coogan 2006), the 21st Century wave of televisual media demonstrated a shift in focus from the fantastical stories of the late 20th Century to everyday reality; “David Goyer, the screenwriter of Batman Begins and Man of Steel suggested, the new superhero films are those which ‘could happen in the same world in which we live.’” (McSweeney 2020, pg.4).

Liam Burke explored the possible connection with 9/11 in-depth, through interviews and surveys, concluding that the diversity exhibited within the superhero genre after 2001 gave no definitive support for a connection to 9/11. Instead, Burke and other critics have surmised that the genre’s sudden popularity and success in this period was the result of many cross-cutting factors including major national and global events, and “cultural, technological, and economic concerns” (Burke 2015, pg. 83). Haslem, Ndalianas, and Mackie argue that what is revealed by repeated claims of the rise of the superhero genre in this time period is “an underlying belief in the cultural need and mythic potential inherent in

superheroes and their stories." (2007, pg. 1). Whilst this is no reason to uncritically assume the aptness of the superhero genre to exploring the identity crises and cultural anxieties of the period, that "underlying belief" indicates the general impression that the popularity of the genre had some relation to the genre's utility in our everyday lives.

2008 is a landmark year in the new wave of superhero genre productions as it is the year that the superhero genre found its "real voice" (Burke 2015, pg. 111), and established itself as a genre in its own right, rather than a subgenre of action/adventure. For the first time, 3 superhero films made it into the top ten of highest-grossing films of the year worldwide (The Dark Knight, Iron Man, and Hancock). The Dark Knight's nominations and wins at the Academy Awards also marked a turn in critical respect for the genre (IGN Movies Team 2008). Alongside this, *Iron Man*'s shocking final scene marked a departure from comic book superhero convention of secret identities, with Tony Stark revealing his superhero persona to the world, marking out the form's claim to the superhero genre.

Television and film continued to expand its claim on the genre with the establishment of studios for major comic book companies Marvel and DC. Marvel Films (established 1993) became Marvel Studios, with a name change of the parent company Marvel Enterprises to Marvel Entertainment demonstrating their move to film production in 2005 after securing the necessary funding for 10 superhero films (Vincent 2005). Marvel Television was founded as a division of Marvel Entertainment in 2010. DC joined in later with DC Films/Studios being founded in 2016. These studios were not the first film and TV wings of comic book companies as Dark Horse Entertainment founded theirs in 1992. However, the expansion of these companies reflected the commercial success of the genre, with Hollywood willing to take the risk on long-term production plans such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

By 2016, 20 superhero movies were ranked in the "top 100 grossing films of all time" (Brown 2016, pg. 2); by 2024, this number had risen to 35 for the US domestic box office, and 26 for worldwide gross (The Numbers 2024).

Despite the apparent distinctiveness of the genre, statistics bodies tend to struggle with the classification of the superhero genre, or for some reason such as critical disapproval, choose not to differentiate it. Instead, superhero films often get subsumed under action,

adventure, sci-fi or fantasy categories. For example, Statista's count of the most popular movie genres in the United States and Canada between 1995 to 2023 by total box office revenue lists Adventure, Action, Drama, Comedy and Horror as 5 most popular genres (2023). The superhero genre is referred to only in the description of the graph presented where superhero films are, referring to as "Titles with adventure and action elements". Due to this, it is common for superhero and film scholars to make reference to the frequency of superhero films performing in the top ten highest-grossing films of the year.

The consistency of the genre to perform well can also be demonstrated by the genre's market share. *The Numbers* breaks down market share by "creative type", using genres as categories except for "contemporary fiction" which includes a wide range of stories that could fit under other genres that are not included individually, such as rom/coms, comedies, action, adventure, thriller etc. Contemporary fiction thereby holds the majority market share with 40.12%, whilst the superhero genre is the 4th largest market share with 9.59%. The strength of the genre is however demonstrated by the amount of films that make up the creative types market shares. Contemporary fiction's market share is fulfilled by over 8000 films, whilst the superhero genre relies on only 162 films. Therefore, superhero films are much more strongly performing individually than any other creative type.

The commercial success of the superhero genre has not meant a strong performance in critical acclaim. The superhero genre is often derided, and its fans accused of being childish. As McSweeney notes, Terry Gilliam and David Cronenberg both refer to the genre as childish and "bullshit." (2020, pg. 5). There is possibly some influence on this perspective from the form's generic features; its bright costumes, wish fulfilment fantasies (Fingeroth 2004), hyperbolic sexualised and hypermasculine portrayals of human bodies (see for example Cocca 2014).

Industry recognition for the genre has also been lacking. Whilst The Dark Knight was nominated for eight Academy Awards, it took until 2018 for a superhero film to win Best Picture, courtesy of Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018). Previous Academy Awards had primarily revolved around art direction, makeup, sound and visual effects (William Bibbiani and IGN Staff 2024).

However, a lack of critical acclaim does not reflect general popular interest in the genre. Unlike some critics of the genre may assume, the audience is adult and not heavily weighted towards a specific gender (McSweeney 2020; Katz 2023; Statista 2021). Alongside the aforementioned commercial success of the genre, Google Trends demonstrate a wider interest in the genre with searches for “superhero” spiking in 2006 and 2008 with a subsequent gradual increase till 2015 where it begins to decline but remains 10 points higher than in 2004 (n.d.).

Indeed, superheroes have become a cultural reference point. For example, during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns, praise for NHS workers widely referred to nurses and doctors as “superheroes” for their efforts in this unprecedented event (Lloyd-Williams 2021). On another tack, even older superhero products are being remixed for cultural references to other phenomena. For example, the Spider-Man pointing at Spider-Man meme has had many evolutions since its first known use in 2011 (KnowYourMeme 2017). It is generally used to indicate insulting similarities between individuals or individuals and objects (such as rubbish bins). The recognition of this particular meme rose to such a height that it was recreated for the promotional material of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) (@spidermanmovie 2021).

However, the early 2020s seemed to indicate interest in the genre had begun to tail off. For example, Marvel Cinematic Universe addition *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (2023) underperformed by $214 million despite a good opening weekend (Gleiberman 2023), whilst *The Marvels* (2023) are the MCU’s worst-performing addition since it began in 2008 (Coyle and the Associated Press 2023). A lack of innovation is blamed for current “superhero fatigue” with fans and industry critics alike commenting on the decreasing quality of superhero films, despite the other records that the films are still able to set (Phillips 2023; Gleiberman 2023; Reddit 2023). For example, *The Marvels* (2023) is the highest-grossing feature release by a Black woman director (Hughes 2024).

Arguably, the lack of innovation or novelty in superhero films indicates the stabilisation of the genre from its emergence to this new wave of age of the superhero in the 2000s. Or perhaps, if we listen to the “underlying belief” that superheroes are needed, the anxieties

and cultural shocks that the genre was responding to have begun to pass. Either way, the commercial success of the superhero genre from either 2000 or 2008 to 2020 marks an unusual period of dominance for the genre within the film industry.

It is this commercial success and the relative popularity that it indicates that makes this genre and time period worthy of study. The popularity of the genre indicates some utility or point of overlap between audience ritual and Hollywood ideology. Commercial success is useful for the industry, but it is also a symptom of the genre's appeal to audiences, its utility for working through sensations, feelings, thoughts, and contemporaneous experiences. As Brown quotes Altman on the topic:

> "Film genres are functional for their society. Whereas producers and exhibitors see genre films as 'product,' critics increasingly recognize their role in a complex cultural system permitting viewers to consider and resolve (albeit actively) contradictions that are not fully mastered by the society in which they live. (1999: 26)"

As the dominant film genre of the early 21st century, the superhero genre appears to be offering an appropriate affectual arena for the audience to parse their cultural experiences.

This is not only a feature of the film as form but of the superhero as a character. The oscillation of the superhero between different social poles, their secret superhero persona and their civilian identity, their superpowers and civilian powerlessness, even their value systems between their civilian and super alter egos tend to clash (Coogan 2006). Following Robert Peaslee's adoption of Janice Bradbury's term, a superhero is an "ideological seam", where the "tightly woven fibres of social cohesion and control" can be revealed, troubled and shown to be faulty. The body of the superhero, with their costumes representing their conflicting value systems and social positions, becomes a battleground that demonstrates competing social formations vying for control over the individual.

The possible contests of social control and representations of identity in the 21st wave of superhero media have been studied across a range of topics by many scholars. Studies have looked at identity in general (Ormrod, Huxley, and Gibson 2014) as well as particular

aspects of identity such as race (Nama 2011), gender (Robbins 1996; Cocca 2016), national identity (Dittmer 2013; Murray 2011), socioeconomic formations (Hassler-Forest 2012), and psychology (Packer 2009; Scarlet 2016). More generally, superhero studies have looked at factors in superheroes' contexts of production and their modes of expression, e.g. mythology (Reynolds 1992; Eco 1972), posthumanism (Jeffery 2016) and fan cultures (Jenkins, Shresthova, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Gamber-Thompson 2016; Brown 2012). Individual films and television series as well as their accompanying comic book parallels have also received attention from critics resulting in such collections as Terrence McSweeney's *Avengers Assemble!* (2018) and Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes' *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero* (2018). Far less attention has been paid to technological aspects with studies more generally focused on film development and digitalisation of the comic book form (Balanzategui 2018; Bukatman 2023; Purse 2007; Stein 2016; Gilmore and Stork 2014; Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenny 2016; Jenkins 2007; Kirtley, Garcia, and Carlson 2015; Rauscher, Stein, and Thon 2021).

More specifically, there has been a lack of attention on networked media and how the synchronous developments in their audience's relationship with networked technology, social media, and the web in general has been responded to, portrayed, and social control contradictions played out in superhero texts. The upcoming collection, Superheroes and Digital Perspectives: Super Data (Young and McCreery 2024), attempts to form a foundation for further scholarship in this area by drawing together a range of critical perspectives from different fields as a jumping off point for further recognition of this important crossover. This thesis continues this work, examining the affects associated with networked technology in a selection of films from across the 2008-2020 period.

However, despite the cultural anxieties present during the period from 2008 to 2018, the explosion of superheroes during this time has not been extensively examined in terms of its response to these anxieties. While previous studies have explored the influence of events like 9/11 and the Iraq War, it is important to consider the period from 2008 onwards as a time of proliferation and transition for the superhero genre, as it moved from a niche subculture to the mainstream.

The rise of social media and user capability

Whilst their initial advent preceded the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of social media sites as necessary locations of communication and self-performance occurred around this time. Twitter (2006-2023, now X) and YouTube (launched 2005) were still relatively new and yet to turn a profit. Facebook (opened to the public in 2006) was also relatively new but this social networking site had overtaken MySpace (launched 2003) in unique worldwide visitors to the page by November 2008 (Schonfeld 2008).

The time that social media users spent on social media sites also rose significantly between December 2008 and December 2009. Global users spent an average of 5 and a half hours on social networking sites in 2009, an 82% increase on the previous year (*Nielsen* 2010). In comparison, global users' time on social networking sites in 2008 grew by 38% from 2007; from 2 hours and ten minutes to around 3 hours.

Another significant technological development from around this time was the release of the Apple iPhone in 2007. As the first touch-screen mobile phone, its popularity resulted in the creation of other android phones with touch-screen capability. As Corey Slumkowski states in their overview of academic usage of the internet, "the subsequent development of "apps" – small computer programs designed to run on smartphones – have altered the ways that many people communicate," (2012).

This is not to say that these few developments were responsible for an outbreak of posthuman subjectivity. However, the change in material conditions, such as the more immediate access of the user to the internet through portable, handheld devices, enabled forms of communication and interaction with technology that resonate with posthuman themes. For example, the constant connection with other humans through both synchronous and asynchronous networked media embodies the user in a particular kind of social proprioception.

Proprioception is the ability of the body to sense where it is located in space through somatic senses rather than vision (Taylor 2009). In his in-depth reflection on the mobile interface and embodiment, Jason Farman proposes social proprioception as the "sense of embodied integrity that is aware of the self's place as that which always already situated in

a relationship to the location of others," (p. 27, 2013). Social proprioception, then, is a specific embodied experience enabled by the user's constant awareness of global, multiple others.

This awareness resonates with certain strands of posthumanism such as Rosi Braidotti's relational selves (p. 36, 2018). Networked technology provides the infrastructure over which relations can act and be made visible to the user; potentially enabling a posthuman reflection of the conception of selfhood as a relational, rather than exceptional, condition.

Social networking sites became arenas not just for instrumental communication but also for the performance of self, for blogging or life logging as an autobiographical practice (Siles 2012; Fallon 2021). Profiles on social networking sites represent the user who creates them. As Rob Cover reflects in his investigation of the performance of self online, the user is in constant negotiation with social networking sites to construct "an ongoing reflexive performance and articulation of selfhood" (pg. 55, 2014).

However, each social networking site has its own aesthetics, text limits and structures. These are also known as affordances which shall be explored in more depth in chapter 3. These sites' different affordances shape the performance of self that the user co-produces with this technological structure (van Dijck 2013). This can lead to a proliferation of differently shaped self performances across different platforms, with the average social media user actively engaging with around 6 different social networking sites (*Data Reportal* 2023).

The use of social media for this self-expression highlights an aspect of the challenges the internet brought to conventional binaries. The terms of public and private have a long and contested history. In terms of the internet's effect on these concepts, the private sphere can be understood as such locations as the home where the individual is in control of the information passing in and out. In opposition to this is the idea of the public sphere, where multiple others including organisations such as the state can interact with, see, and monitor action and information (p. 551, Ford 2011).

In her reflection on the impact of information technology on the concept of the public and

private spheres, Ford pulls on Habermas and Meyrowritz to suggest that the public/private distinction had begun to collapse in the mid-1900s with the introduction of the television to the home as an information device that broke through the boundary of this private space (2011). She then explains that the development of information technology and its gradual relocation to the home continued this trend.

Social media and internet connected devices then represent another step in this collapse of secure, conceptual boundaries. The primary feature of social media that enables this blurring of public and private is “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Relationships of different kinds exist in the same structures and are difficult to separate, both in terms of access to information and in the sense that the information that represents these relationships online appear in the same aesthetics and contexts as each other (Quin and Papacharissi 2014). Whilst the user may choose to separate these relationships through different management techniques, such as using different sites for different relationships (Quin 2013), the user must put in this work, rather than relying on the spaces or sites to maintain these boundaries.

The twentieth centuries’ critical fields such as posthumanism, post colonialism, and postmodernism, had already formed challenges the humanist notion the unitary, bounded, and exceptional self. The collapse of the private and public selves in the online world supported a continued reevaluation of the concept of selfhood and the performance of identity. The affordances of networked technology transformed the ways in which individuals referenced and produced their identities, prompting a need to reconsider the notion of an original, authentic self (Bucher 2016; Nagy and Neff 2015).

Social networking sites offer security settings for the content that user’s post. However, there is always potential for online content to be accessed, witnessed, and shared by unknown others (Burkell et al. 2014; boyd 2007). This blurs the boundaries between the private and the public online (Papacharissi 2009). The free flow of information between these once conceptually separate spheres emphasises the permeable, fluid, and constructed nature of the boundaries, a key feature of some strands of posthumanism (e.g. Haraway 1991; Braidotti 2018).

One impact of this is the effect on user's behaviour when it comes to performing the self online. Users have been found to consider unknown, unseen audiences; shaping and managing their online image to appeal to this nebulous audience (boyd 2007; Gilpin 2011; Marwick 2013). As Hearn explains in her wider study of self-branding, the promotion of self has been a cultural discursive formation since at least the 1990s. In a neoliberal prioritisation of individualism and self-governance, the self is actively shaped and performed as "a site for the extraction of value" (p. 201, Hearn 2008).

The change that occurs with networked media is not the foundation of such self-branding discourse but the prevalence and persistence of the content that demonstrates this self-branding exercise taking place (boyd 2013). Moreover, the structure of social media networks appears to reward users for content creation and interaction by making their content visible more often to a wider range of users (Bucher 2014). The visibility of this content is a direct reward for affecting other users into interaction with online content. Thus, the success of self-branding, or the user's status as a site for the extraction of value, becomes linked with their visibility online. It is this morphing of self-branding practices into a visible process that the first case study of the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) appears to engage with.

The value that the user's profile, content, and interactions online hold includes both their ability to provoke further online content production and interaction, and the potential of these interactions to be turned into marketing profiles. Data collection practices online have been the subject of legal action, such as the (EU) GDPR, due to concerns over the control of data arising from users' action online. This data is used to compile audience profiles, sold to marketing companies to enable targeted advertising campaigns (Zuboff 2019a). This, again, emphasises a visbility or ability to be recorded that is particularly supported by networked technology (Zuboff 2019b; Beer 2018).

To capture the various imperatives on the self to be performed online, to be visible, to be a brand, to have its actions and emotions harvested for targeted advertising and successfully produce or support the flow of capital, this thesis proposes and uses the term "networked neoliberalism". This thesis intends for networked neoliberalism to suggest a specific

dimension of neoliberalism that adapted to and is evident in our interaction with web technologies.

Networked neoliberalism refers the convergence of market-oriented values and networked communication platforms, where individuals engage in self-performance online to produce affecting content for user engagement and capital accumulation. This thesis understands networked neoliberalism to be a discursive formation specific to the infrastructure of networked technologies that allow for the persistence (boyd 2014), visbility (Bucher 2014), flow of information and emotion through networked social arenas (Dean 2010).

This thesis also uses the term "user" as shorthand to refer to the user of the internet, the human individual that actively engages with the networked affordances of the web. Additionally, the words “individual” or “person” are occasionally used to imply the unwitting capture of the individual in networked technology's structures, including data harvesting. For this thesis, the distinction between these human interactions with the web comes in the individual's active or passive engagement. However, as is described in chapter 5, the distinction means little by the mid-2010s due to the pervasion of networked media throughout the spaces the individual inhabits and encounters.

The thesis maintains the distinction in describing the human user’s orientation to the web to indicate the contesting demands and structures involved in the production and capture of self online. The user’s active engagement may be seen to co-produce their self performance (Cover 2014). Whereas the individual’s unwitting engagement with co-production, for example through sites construction of data profiles, suggests incursive and nonconsensual forms of web engagement (Zuboff 2019b; Young 2018, 2020).

Affordances, superheroes, and the posthuman experience

Our experience of the web can be considered potentially posthuman. The connectivity and awareness of other users for example encourages a recognition of the relationality of self and self production (Farman 2013; Braidotti 2018). This thesis aims to investigate the superhero genre’s interaction with these posthuman potentials and its representation of our interaction with digital networks.

The affordances of the user-oriented sites present both opportunities and demands, as shall be further discussed in chapter 3 on the theoretical frameworks this thesis adopts in its approach (Bucher 2016; Nagy and Neff 2015). Affordances enable the user to act, such as by creating content. However, their restrictions of the form this content or interaction can take, for example a limited range of emoji reaction buttons (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock, 2014: Beloff 2018), and sites' prioritisation of certain forms of content, for example those that garner the most responses from other users, invite users to engage in particular ways (Bucher 2016).

The superhero is well placed to figure the potentials of networked media. Their split identities speak to the multiple production of selves across different social networking sites. In his article, "The Metaphor of Celebrity, Three Superheroes, and one Persona or another", Joel Deshaye proposes that identity crises arise out of the metaphoric confusion between the public and private parts of the personas of superheroes and celebrities (2014). In this way, Deshaye begins to approach the multiple performance of the self, drawing on other identity analyses, such as Diana Fuss', to describe celebrities' negotiations between the public and private, how their position depends upon the "tacit promise" to fans of a more personal identification, and how that promise thereby threatens their private identity - just as with superheroes and their disguises that protect their loved ones (p.576, Deshaye 2014; Fuss 1995).

Deshaye analyses the film *Persona* (1966) which uses the superimpositioning of the faces of the two main characters to represent the overidentification of a fan with the celebrity they admire. Deshaye pulls on Noel Carrol's to label this representational strategy as "homospatiality" – the superimpositioning of images of entities that could not exist in the same space but appear to (p. 573, Deshaye 2014).

This concept is useful for considering superheroes in a way that Deshaye does not explore. The superhero's costumed self and their private individual self, the civilian, often occupy the same physical space despite acting as different and sometimes opposing individuals (Coogan 2006; Fingeroth 2004). Even Bruce Banner/the Incredible Hulk share one bodily space, even if that space mutates and shifts depending on which personality is performing

at that time.

The homospatiality of their civilian and super alter egos suggest the conjuration of a stable sense of embodied identity through the performance of self and recognition of personal identity by others. The selves performed by the superhero resonate with the multiple performances of self online that are associated with the same user. Moreover, much like the visual emphasis of the superheroes with their fantastic bodies and costumes (Avery-Natale 2014; Jeffery 2016), the user's image online is a major factor in the representation of their selves, hence the trend of impression management and self-branding continuing in online spaces. This is one of the ways that this thesis sees the superhero genre as being able to materialise the dynamics of the contemporary user's potential relationships with digital networked media.

Formal engagement with web aesthetics

A central assumption of the thesis is that the digital, intangible relationships engaged with in a user's daily interactions with the web are able to be materialised and visually (re)presented in film and television texts. This idea stems from film and television critical theory, which emphasises the representational power of media. These theories suggest that films and TV shows capture, reflect, and respond to their historical and social contexts, allowing viewers to engage with and respond to these representations (e.g. Hall 1980; Williams 1974). The character's relationship with fictional technologies serves as an example of this representation. For instance, Tony Stark's interaction with his suit and AI system JARVIS in searching through databases or targeting enemies can be interpreted as analogous to our relationships with searchable databases and drone targeting systems. However, we are not (currently) physically encased in the technological objects that facilitate our virtual interactions with information.

Emerging from the analysis of case studies, it becomes evident that the representation of our experience of the web in the superhero genre has evolved in tandem with the emergence and normalisation of web technologies. The role of mobile objects in facilitating our interaction with the web is crucial to consider. Mobile devices, such as the iPhone and its

Android counterparts, introduced in 2007, provided easy access to web affordances. Through apps and touchscreen capabilities, users could engage with specific areas and arenas of the web, creating a haptic experience and fostering constant connectivity due to the portability of these objects.

The early case studies in this thesis reflect a material focus on technological objects. For instance, the development of Iron Man's suit showcases the progression from blocky to sleek modular components. Similarly, the dynamic panel layout in The Incredible Hulk mirrors the windows of screen media, emphasising the visual connection to digital interfaces (Jones, 2018).

As time progresses, representational strategies shift to focus on superimposition and fluid camera movements within scenes, reflecting the naturalisation of mobile networked technology. Users are no longer fixated on the physical objects or the haptic experience but are immersed in the virtual realm, where information from various sources and times coalesce without distinct differences in phenomenological experience. This lack of distinction and the proliferation of information are mirrored in the use of superimposition, overlaying windows and posts, to simulate the user's encounter with information. Furthermore, the camera's free-flowing movement replicates the user's experience of navigating virtual spaces and traversing through hyperlinks without warning, jumping from one node to another.

Moreover, the shift in the superhero genre from singular protagonists to ensemble casts, even in individually named films or series, reflects the idea of perpetual connectivity. The viewer's perception expands to include the recounted experiences of infinite others, further mirroring the networked experience.

Why is it important to replicate the user's experiences in the aesthetics and form of the superhero genre? Because the genre is not simply reflecting cultural concerns with elements of networked neoliberalism, but it provides an affectual arena in which the viewer can potentially comprehend their own experiences of networked neoliberalism. The genre activates the viewer's experience of using the web, encouraging them to connect their own experiences with the stories and self-models portrayed on the screen. Whilst a range of responses, including oppositional readings of the text are possible, this anchoring of the

viewer's feelings allows for critical distance, enabling reflection and recognition of the effects of networked neoliberalism (Hall 2001 [1980]).

Thesis interest and research questions

> The central research question addressed in this study is: How do representations of superheroes in film and television from 2008 to 2020 provide insight into the ways digital networked media shape contemporary conceptions of self? By closely examining the representations and structures of feeling expressed within cultural products, this thesis proposes that the superhero genre figured the potential for alternative subjectivities made possible by networked technologies and the users interaction with them.

As shall be fully explored in chapter 3 on the theories that contribute to this thesis' frame of reference, the role of the superhero as a figuration for possible forms of self follows from N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Harway's conceptualisation of the cyborg as the figuration of the effect of technology of the conceptualisation of self in the 1980s and 1990s (Hayles 1995; Haraway 1991). The superhero genre was chosen as the primary focus of analysis due to its prominence and dominance during the relevant time period. Its prolific production and widespread popularity indicate a significant response from audiences who resonate with the emotions and themes it captures.

To guide this investigation, the following sub-questions will be explored:

- How does the superhero genre represent the self?
- How does the superhero genre represent the internet and its affordances?
- What effect are these affordances seen to have on the characters' performance and experience of self?
- What feelings are associated with the genre's representations of the web and its effect on the conceptualisation and performance of self?

By addressing these research questions, this thesis aims to shed light on the complex interactions between the superhero genre, networked neoliberalism, and the formation of selfhood. It seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how the latest wave of superhero

genre films and television series both reflects and shapes our perceptions, experiences, and responses to the challenges of networked neoliberalism in the contemporary digital age.

Thesis layout

The thesis will begin by presenting and discussing relevant debates from various fields to situate the thesis and its contributions within broader academic contexts. Building upon the theoretical frameworks explained earlier, I will provide a more detailed explanation of my methodology.

The subsequent four chapters will engage in textual analysis to address questions that support the overall research focus of how the superhero genre represents the effects of networked neoliberalism on the self. Chapter 4 will examine how the self is conceptualised in networked neoliberalism and how this conceptualisation is represented at the beginning of the relevant time period. This chapter will explore the development of networked neoliberalism in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, illustrating that the dominant understanding of self was based on its visible production through online self-performances.

Chapter 5 will delve into the experience of making self-production visible and explore how it feels to have the process of self-production exposed. The concept of the archive will support this investigation, as the web can be seen as a networked archive of self-performances, where all web content has the potential to be (mis)interpreted as a form of self-performance.

In Chapter 6, the focus will shift to the infra- and superstructures of the web, examining the superhero genre's representation of our encounters with data, algorithms, and artificial intelligence online. This analysis will demonstrate how mechanisms of data harvesting contribute to the alienation of the self, similar to the alienation of labour from the individual and the body (Cubitt, 2013). It will reveal that the imperative to produce affecting content for the purpose of generating user interaction and data harvesting places the capacity to affect and be affected at the core of our understanding of selfhood.

Finally, Chapter 7 will critically investigate the potential alternative models of selfhood that

networked neoliberalism enables. The central role of affective capacities in contemporary selfhood opens up two potential directions. Firstly, lived experiences are hierarchically valued based on their capacity to produce capital, which raises concerns about an assumption of legitimate selfhood tied to the commercial value of communicated experiences. Secondly, the cultivation of affective power could foster empathetic modes of being in the world, supporting meaningful change and equalisation of power dynamics across individual and collective identity groups, encompassing both human and nonhuman realms

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This thesis seeks to answer the question of how the superhero genre represents the affects of networked neoliberalism's effect on the conceptualisation of self. To do this I will be analysing contemporary film and television series from the genre. The thesis' time period of interest is post-2008 as the simultaneous rise of ubiquitous networked media provided an outlet or line of flight from the global financial crisis' destabilisation of established economic forms. This thesis proposes that the imperatives of networked neoliberalism, in part, emerged from this point of crisis, as people sought new and reliable sources of capital.

To lay the groundwork for the thesis' analysis, it is necessary to first gain an understanding of debates in relevant academic fields. The topics under discussion here will be neoliberalism, self, and posthumanism, with supporting theoretical frameworks from affect studies, internet studies, and, of course, superhero studies. Significantly, these fields witnessed a parallel increase in interest and number of publications in the period leading up to and following the 2008 global financial crisis. This synchronicity suggests that some of the cultural debates and concerns being addressed in academic fields was related to, or reflects, the public concerns and structures that led to the financial crisis and ensuing reconceptualisation of the relationship between self and capital.

Furthermore, 2008 marked the beginning of the superhero genre's ensuing dominance in visual media over the next decade, indicating that it was the popular equivalent to these academic discussions. Through a comprehensive analysis of relevant literature, this review aims to shed light on the complex relationship between the self, networked neoliberalism, and the superhero genre. By exploring these interconnected themes, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the contemporary conception of self is shaped, negotiated, and contested in the era of networked neoliberalism.

To note, I will occasionally be using the terms emergent and dominant to refer to the development of this posthuman cultural formation, and in doing so I am referencing Raymond Williams' uses of the terms to describe cultural practices (1977). He defines

“emergent” practices as those that are new and possibly resistant to “dominant” culture by providing alternative values and practices. “Dominant” culture on the other hand is the hegemonic set of practices, the allowed and accepted cultural formations.

Neoliberalism and its impact on selfhood

Neoliberalism is a term that is almost universally used in a pejorative manner, with accusations of it contributing to the widening socioeconomic inequality. Critics, such as James Peck, argue that the very ambiguity surrounding the term reflects the “tangled mess” that neoliberalism itself represents; “[t]he tangled mess that is the modern usage of neoliberalism may be telling us something about the tangled mess of neoliberalism itself,” (2010, pg. 15). I would argue instead that the reliance on self-management that constitutes the individual’s role as both consumer and producer in a neoliberal economy means that it is impossible to define as a system above or outside of the individuals that it subjugates. It is instead an effect, an epiphenomenon of an assemblage of policies and economic imperatives that the individual is interpolated into. While it may appear messy from within, it undeniably creates effective actors within the global market it has helped shape. Moreover, every aspect of the individual, including emotions, can be commodified and converted into capital through external performances. The circulation of affect enables the circulation of capital, leading to the alienation of emotions and affect from the individuals experiencing them. The capital-centric focus of neoliberalism thus fragments the self and its constituent experiences. This thesis investigates the experience of the alienated and fragmented self for exterior goals, something that superheroes emulate in their competing selves and ideologies.

While the concept of selfhood will be explored more thoroughly in the following sections, it is essential to first acknowledge the potential effects of neoliberalism on the self. Within capitalist society, the individual operates as a market actor, necessitating a certain degree of self-regulation to align their actions and behaviours with the imperatives of capital production. However, the relationship between neoliberalism and the self takes on a new dimension following the turning point represented by the 2008 financial crisis. The crisis prompted a shift in how capital was produced, relying more than ever on individuals but in

the context of virtual networked technologies that facilitated atomised forms of capital generation outside traditional institutions. Notably, some critics have argued that institutional trust was degraded by the global financial crisis and governments response to it (Deslatte 2020). The reduction in public trust could have fuelled the transition to more individualised, self-reliant forms of capital generation through online spaces. The simultaneous development of web affordances and movement of labour and work-related networking to the web supports this interpretation. Individuals' interest in social networking sites can thereby be understood to be a search for safety and independence from institutions that were deemed untrustworthy, rather than a response to any neoliberal individualist imperative. By exploring this relationship, an understanding of how neoliberal ideologies have shaped notions of selfhood and individual agency in contemporary society can emerge.

Neoliberalism emerged as an evolution of economic liberalism, which was extensively discussed by Adam Smith. Economic liberalism emphasised the role and freedom of the individual in the production and exchange of capital. While Smith advocated for minimal government intervention, the experience of financial crises generated concerns that led to increased government involvement in safeguarding the freedoms of market actors (Konzelmann et. al, 2013). For example, Keynesian economics arose in reaction to the Great Depression. John Maynard Keynes argued that the market is inherently unstable, prone to "waves of irrational psychology" that “swing from unbridled optimism to overwhelming gloom,” (Keynes, in Konzelmann, 2014, pg. 724). Consequently, Keynes believed that government intervention was necessary to balance the interests of individual and institutional market actors and maintain market stability. However, the credibility of Keynesian policies diminished in the early 1970s due to rising inflation, inequality, and unemployment.

As Eric Hobsbawm describes, “the crisis decades [1970s-90s] were the era when the national state lost its economic powers,” (1994, pg. 408). This period coincided with the stalemate crises of the Cold War, during which neoliberalism gained strength by advocating for individual freedoms as a counter to the socialist threat posed by the USSR (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal ideology promoted self-entrepreneurship, reduced government restrictions on market actors, and a profit-led market while simultaneously utilising state intervention to

prevent competition from resulting in collectivism or instability. Thus, the aggressive individualism encouraged by neoliberalism emerged in response to threats and crises, and already began to show paradoxical ideals.

In this balancing of the private individual and the state they belong to, both must “behave like a market actor across all [their] functions,” (Harvey, 2005). Thus, in terms of power relations, the institutions and individuals that constitute the state are governed in the same way- as market actors where their worth is understood in terms of the capital they have the potential to produce and control. All market actors are then equal in terms of their ability to become self-entrepreneurs and successful producers of capital, encouraging a meritocracy that rewards those who exceptionally excel regardless of background. As Jeremy Gilbert states this is only an “ideal” as in reality, access to opportunities and support to achieve such capital is highly class, race, gender, identity dependent (2013).

Gilbert uses Foucault’s model of neoliberalism as a discursive formation to frame it as dependent upon the idea of “human selfhood and of the idea of the individual both as the ideal locus of sovereignty and the site of governmental intervention,” (2013, pg. 11). He then proposes that neoliberalism achieves success through the postmodern “fragmentation of the social world” (2013, pg. 11) that supports ruthless individualism. In doing so, Gilbert rather forgets the collapse of contexts and alienating categorisation that contemporary mediated communication allows, widening social worlds rather than fragmenting them. He also ignores the consequences to the feeling of being an individual under the constant pressure of having sovereign power whilst being subjected to state intervention. This paradoxical situation of the human subject requires an oscillation of self-understanding within and in relation to these conflicting power dynamics.

Neal Curtis explores this experience through the shockwaves that the 2008 financial crisis caused. Governmental response to the 2008 financial crisis to bail out failing banking structures was somewhat of an anomaly within the contemporary economic approach. Utilising Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety and of *dasein*, Curtis describes the anxieties raised by this threatened collapse of the system as a “radical truth” that only this form of individualistic capitalism has so far had the power to achieve (2013b, pg. 78). In such

economic crises, that the economics of accumulation are built around, the very being-in-the-world of each individual is so threatened that the only response is to gather what is left and try to maintain the previous experience. Curtis believes this is particularly desirable, and hence particularly disallowing of alternatives to neoliberalism, because it is not a collective move or loss, each individual's dasein and sovereignty is at risk from such a collapse, the collapse is distinctly felt as personal.

As we can see from this history, neoliberalism developed in reaction to crises such as the Great Depression and Second World War. As Kathleen Stewart (2005, pg. 326) somewhat describes, the simultaneous rise of a discourse of anxiety and self-help, trauma and therapy is no coincidence;

> "We find ourselves in the midst of a self-help movement, privatisation, cocooning, family values, utopia walled up in theme parks and franchise culture, feel-good movies and colourful decor…But there is still trauma, too, in the anaesthetised distraction of an OK middle ground defending a womb against the world."

Fear is used, not always consciously, as a means to ignore and avoid alternatives to the neoliberal system. In fact, catastrophising helps to ring-fence the perceived stability and security neoliberalism provides; "risk society brings us the worst-case scenario in the very effort to insure against it," (Stewart, 2005, pg. 325). Crises are necessary for a capitalism of accumulation and due to their threat to the experience of every individual, each economic crisis is felt as a personal trauma, a potential wound to the meaning and value of the sovereign self within a neoliberal culture.

Neoliberalism and Governmentality: The effect of Neoliberalism on the Self

Whilst selfhood is a concept that will be explored next, it is important to mention at this juncture the possible effects of neoliberalism on the self. As the individual is a market actor as much as their society is, a level of self-regulation is required to move towards the capital production imperative.

Following from Foucault's governmentality and micro power relations, Miller and Rose propose that governance from a distance is performed through "microphysics of power," (1990, pg. 10). Drawing on Michel Callon and Bruno Latour's models of technological innovation, Miller and Rose see society as akin to "a loose assemblage of agents and agencies into a functioning network," (1990, pg. 10). The objectives of the governing systems are then translated through this network to the agents who are supposedly encouraged to aim for them. Capital-accumulation imperatives are both disguised through a language of expertise and disseminated to "the activities of 'private' social actors under the guidance of [this] expertise," (Miller and Rose, 1990, pg. 11). Along with the rise of neoliberalism after WWII, they see the idea of citizenship as changing from a mutually dependent relationship with a supportive state, to individualist with the state perceived primarily as a provider of freedom of choice. In this new power relation, "the 'autonomous subjectivity of the productive individual has become a central economic resource," (Miller and Rose, 1990, pg. 26). The individual's constant consumer choices provide them with power but also the drive towards their own constant accumulation of capital. This has become so ingrained in the conceptualisation of the individual's self that consumer choice and "work [are] essential element[s] in the path to self-realisation," (Miller and Rose, 1990, pg. 27). Self-regulation then is the individual's hope for more capital and hence, more success, where success is fulfilling the replicated ideological objectives of capital production.

Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea emphasise the affective dimension of these neoliberal freedoms. The overwhelming responsibility to choose everything from "which hospital to be ill in, which life-style to adopt, which identity to fashion" generates "insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression," (Hall and O'Shea, 2013, pg. 12). This includes fear of the consequences of personal responsibility for making the "wrong choice." In a culture of supposed fairness of opportunity and of meritocracy, neoliberalism emphasises the power of the individual to master their own sources of revenue, to create and manage a personal brand. Thus, any inequality that can be seen is assumed to be less a matter of the structure and more of a personal failure. Hall and O'Shea state that there is some hope against neoliberal hegemony in the existence of affects against neoliberal imperatives such as "empathy for others, a liking for co-operation rather than competition, or a sense of injustice," (2013, pg. 21).

Unfortunately, I would regard this hope as weak given that self-entrepreneurship utilising networked technology can convert individuals with shared affectual understandings of resistance onto a revenue stream by becoming emotion agents and directing or participating in that exchange of resistance sentiment.

Bringing the capital-imperative into a more private setting, Angela McRobbie's analysis of the mother figure posits neoliberal feminism as idealising "the ubiquitous figure of the middle-class, professional, wife and mother," (2013, pg. 119). In opposition to the lower class, or "underclass", mother, the middle-class ideal is active, sexual, aspirational, and professionally successful. Thereby, feminist ideals are moulded to neoliberal imperatives of management for capital-production where families are considered as "businesses", thereby reducing the strain on government welfare expenditure. The particular expectations on female subjects within neoliberalism thus places a capital imperative on both the professional-public and the personal-private aspects of their lives. As shown here, through self-management and the "conduct of conduct" every aspect of self, performed correctly, has the potential to be converted into capital. This reduces the permissible range of self-expressions and performances within neoliberal society to only those that produce a desirable self, a capital-producing self. Moreover, the individualist emphasis on sovereignty and choice makes outcomes and negative experiences a matter of personal responsibility: the "wrong" choices must have been made.

The Self and Performative Identity

To provide a context through which to approach contemporary engagement with science fiction and the figure of the superhero, the concept of the networked self will first be looked at, as without it the relevance of the explored genres cannot be understood. As the networked self is an updated understanding of the self in line with changes in communication technology, a background on models of self provides a useful context.

Up until the time of Rene Descartes, the self is conceived of as an immaterial soul, one which either controls the body and can be independent of it, or for which the body is necessary and inseparable (Barresi and Martin, 2011). Descartes then frames this as a

dualism of mind and body, rather than the soul. In Descartes' model, the mind is largely independent from the body, has actions and thoughts independently of the brain, though they affect one another. John Locke re-establishes the linkage of soul and mind. Though there is some confusion from Locke scholars over the specific meanings of Locke's terms, Locke's "memory theory of self" contends that personal identity is dependent on consciousness as an organising principle of experience consciousness (Strawson, 2011). This consciousness is specifically applicable to memory as the individual must be aware that they are the same person that they can remember acting in the world. Self as dependent on memory now has empirical support such as Martin Conway's later discussed Self-Memory System model.

In his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), David Hume then rebukes Locke by arguing that is the self can only be experienced by introspection, it is more of an illusion of the phenomena humans experience, including the transmission and tempering of sympathy and other affects between individuals. Hume in this sense presents an interesting forerunner of affect theory which also deals with the circulation of feelings, emotions, and affects. This perspective would also appear to align with the posthuman understanding of the human as a product of networks, or assemblage. To extend Hume's social experience of the self, Hegel is among the first to propose a development of self primarily through social interaction. In this model, an individual's self-recognition arises from their difference from and acknowledgement of others.

The next key development is Sigmund Freud's expansion of the idea of the unconscious elements of self, of the repressed experiences and desires of the individual. Interestingly, Freudian notions are dying hard in psychoanalysis and mainstream thought despite their regular debunking within contemporary psychological empiricism. Whether or not Freud's model is in any way representative of the self, the idea of hidden true selves and repressed memories have had an undeniable effect on the concept of self in the cultural imaginary. This can be seen in the themes of quests for self-discovery, and generalised distrust around the veracity of human memory, especially in plots utilising psychotherapy, amnesia and repressed traumatic memories. Moreover, Freud's explanations add to rational explanations of the self by describing a composition of "multiple flows of energy that can transform into

one another unstoppably and even violently," (Mansfield, 2010, pg. 5). Hence again, the idea of self is conceived of as both rational and uncontrollably felt.

The interactionist understanding of the social self developed in the 1800s with G.W.F. Hegel, although as has already been shown Hume had hinted at this more social understanding of self with his explanation of the transmission of affect between individuals. Hegel's understanding of the self is interesting as it relies on a more external to internal movement. The self exists "only in being acknowledged" by others, as in the external acceptance of self-performances is what legitimises and allows self-consciousness to form (Hegel, [1807] 2001, pg. 630). The self becomes a product of its culture and social interaction.

Erving Goffman's 1956 *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* elaborates on external self-performance and the processes necessary for appropriate action in specific social spheres. He describes the split between back and front self-performance in terms of the theatre. The front is literally the front of the stage where social actors are in public view and are encouraged to perform desirable personalities. The social actors on stage can be individuals or parts of teams, social groups that cohere but are also expected to perform to the standards of that group. The backstage is the area in which the social actor can prepare and gather information required for suitable performances to match the social situation that they are to be in. Archives of online self performance can make this process of information collection and consequent front self-performance changes obvious and hence, disillusion the actor's coherence for the audience.

The socially defined self does lack an acknowledgement of the body and of feelings. This understanding prioritises those affectual performances which are and can be socially transmitted over the individual's experience that is not just performed for others. Following Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva's work importantly addresses those feelings, such as shame, fear and desire, that are regarded as outside of rational thought. The self, or rather subject, explored in Kristeva's work develops out of the imposition of discourse on the pre-Oedipal child. This forms a recognition of the mother as "Other" to the subject. The subject seeks an independent identity and to achieve this, it abjects and regards with horror and disgust that which is both part of it and not it, such as bodily waste and some sexual desires (Kristeva,

1982).

The society and the subject both work at maintaining this boundary, of which marginalised non-white identities as well as the feminine have fallen on the wrong side. The definition and experience of selfhood is not only culturally and historically dependent, it is also body-specific. At different times, various body types are exempted from full participation and rights of personhood and selfhood. Relevant to this thesis is the idea that these ejected parts of the self, including the other, actually still constitute the self and represent a kind of excess that the formation of self is dependent upon.

Whilst these understandings of the self are important for an analytical approach, it is interesting to note that only Kristeva here really deals directly with the feeling of selfhood. Whether or not the self is essential, there is undeniably an organising principle behind an individual's experiences of the world, their memories, emotions, actions, and their conscious self-performances. That is, regardless of how the self is formed, the self is always already felt, or the concept wouldn't exist in the first place.

Superheroes as Representations of Selfhood

Superheroes mimic our own engagement with networked technology in their split performances, impression management, and negotiation between public and private, and thereby provide an apt figure through which to work through these questions of the effect on individuals. The experiences of networked society encourage engagement with fictions that explore the individual's fluctuating position within and in relation to the social whole in which they are situated. Superheroes are especially well placed for this in their role as mediator between private citizens and public value enforcement, their performance of multiple, desirable selves, and their use of technology in these negotiations of individual sovereignty. Here I will provide an overview of the history of superhero genre analysis and outline some relevant themes that are useful for understanding how the superhero has become one of the most produced and consumed genre in the last 10-15years.

The beginning of superhero criticism comes in 1954 with Wertham's scathing attack on comic books and television in *Seduction of the Innocent*. In this, now invalidated, study,

Wertham examined children's responses to violent television shows and comic books. Wertham singled out Wonder Woman and Batman in the superhero genre because of the non-traditional presentation of gender roles and homosexual undertones that he discovered within them. Wertham's attack signals that the superhero genre was beginning to be taken seriously, even if this did lead to its demonisation, contributing to the formation of the Comics Code Authority that sought to regulate the content of the children's medium. The next marker of superhero criticism is Umberto Eco's 1972 "The Myth of Superman", a text that neatly analyses Batman's behaviours and his disregard for private property despite working to protect it. Eco outlined Superman as an archetype that makes the idea of personal responsibility obsolete, prevented as he is from planning ahead and moving through time due to the cyclical, never-ending repetitions of minor adjustments to his social surroundings so that the Superman series never truly ends.

Literature on the genre then goes quiet again until the early to mid-1990s where a couple of academics publish larger surveys of the genre; Trina Robbins with her gender focussed *The Great Women Superheroes* in 1996, and Richard Reynolds' discussion of the structural similarities between existent myths and superhero stories *in Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* in 1994. Again, the literature quietens until the 2000s, with a large cluster of works centred within a few years of 2010. This is around the same time that Marvel began to release the films for "Phase One" of its so-called Cinematic universe (MCU), a series of films set in the same universe with many cross-over opportunities, as well as their very popular comic book series Civil War, now also part of the MCU. The famous trilogy of Batman films directed by Christopher Nolan was also released in the mid-2000s. Not only had criticism remembered the genre existed, mainstream viewing was now also demanding more superheroes.

The superhero studies of the 21st century have so far been largely predisposed to focusing on the comic book iterations of the genre, valuing them as somewhat of an original form. Peter Coogan's (2006) *The Secret Origin of a Genre* is widely cited for its application of genre theory to the superhero stories to prove that they should be regarded as a genre in their own right, rather than as a subgenre of science fiction. Coogan identifies the main

characteristics of a superhero as their secret identity (costume included), powers above the average human, and a mission, normally prosocial in nature, that drives them in life. Sharon Packer provides a psychologist's psychoanalysis of superheroes in 2009, while Danny Fingeroth, a veteran comics writer himself, had released his own psychoanalytic study of the genre in 2004. His analysis places the superhero genre as a replacement for nonsecular collective identities by providing an alternative, secular value system and consequent cohesion with other fans. Despite their popularity with fans and the mainstream public alike, the televisual iterations of the genre are somewhat neglected by academics. Their popularity implies their rich potential as cultural texts that respond to some need or desire in their audiences and hence should be given far more attention than they have received to date.

Reynolds, Fingeroth, and Coogan all remark on the passivity of superheroes and proactivity of supervillains. I propose that this difference is one with idealistic ends, to pose the superheroes' reinforcement of hegemonic power structures as part of a functioning, normal self-performance. Both superheroes and supervillains' identities are inspired by trauma.

Coogan defines the traumatic origin story of the superhero as a key generic feature. Whilst he doesn't connect them, he also posits trauma as feature of the supervillain, including those outside of the superhero genre; "Many supervillains suffer a wound -typically psychological and emotional but often with a physical component – that shapes their lives and which they are unable to recover from," (Coogan, 2006, pg. 71). The "physical component" that Coogan points out here is particularly pertinent as the supervillain cannot "recover" from it. The supervillain allows their physical marker to remain and, in so doing, alienates themselves from society. Their physical marker is demonised as much as the superhero's anonymising costume is praised for the humility they show. If they have such physical disabilities or disfiguration, superheroes are likely to "fix" it through technological means, like Iron Man's heart, or wield it to the benefit of larger society, like Peter Parker/Spider-Man's genetic mutation. Their costumes then become both physical reminders of their trauma and symbols of hope to the civilians that they protect. It is the reactions of these figures to trauma that motivates them to become either the superhero or supervillain.

The superhero converts their trauma into a prosocial mission; to protect people and fight

crime. They act for society, although not always within the law. However, their life is oriented around trauma to the extent that their activities as a superhero are merely reactive to crises. To extend Eco's analysis that the superhero has an inability to plan and repeats small crises arcs to prolong the comic book series. The superhero is frozen in time, the time of their trauma, replaying situations with one fundamental difference, this time they are the more powerful actants and can save the victim, representing whoever they couldn't save the first time. This is the pattern of behaviour that Packer uses to propose that rather than suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, superheroes exhibit an alternate form Post-Traumatic Strength Disorder. That is, superheroes avoid "psychopathy" by converting their struggle into socially beneficial behaviours. Packer links this role of the superhero to the mass traumas suffered in WWII and the desire of society to renormalise, "society as a whole became the walking wounded," (2010, pg. 236). However, because they are constantly re-enacting their trauma, superheroes are not proactive in establishing protective organisations or adjust hegemonic systems to be more equally supportive of their constituents. An exception to this is *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) as Tony Stark and Bruce Banner create artificial intelligence (AI) to run a global defence program. This proactive move ends badly; the AI identifies humans as the biggest threat to earth and needs to be destroyed before it completely wipes out the human race. Overall, the expectation that the superhero is the "good guy" is one that is predicated on their ability to express their trauma in productive, prosocial ways and reinforce hegemonic power structures.

This model has been utilised in real world contexts. Superhero theory, used by clinical psychologists and written about by Dr Janina Scarlet (2016), comprises the use of superhero narratives to provide creative visualisations and pathways to recover from PTSD. A related practice is termed "geek therapy" where the wider fandoms of so-called geek culture are used to extend identification within therapy by using recognisable and cared about figures.

This real-world application provides some insight into the ambivalent reactions to and perspectives on those with trauma. The inability to independently cope with trauma is condemned within the superhero genre. Superheroes are positioned as the "good guys", because of their prosocial diversion of their grief and anxiety. They build support networks of

similarly “wound[ed]” superpowered people. Conversely, supervillains are condemned for their inability to cope, they are destructive and intentionally alienate themselves from society.

Supervillains react to their trauma by attacking the structures they blame for it, including other members of society. Their physical markers of trauma remain, like the Joker’s distinctive colouration, and villains make no move to change it. Their physical disfigurement is a symbol of their dysfunction, their inability or refusal to convert their trauma into something productive. Unlike superheroes, they are proactive in their role, planning and acting against societies’ ideals. Even when they act for the greater good, they contravene moral expectations such as nonlethal combat. Their antisocial nature means that they are seen in opposition to society. In his comparative study that sees the superhero genre as a mythology, Richard Reynolds frames these antisocial qualities as “deriv[ing] from a radical inability to function in the everyday world – in short, sketches of various types of madness,” (1992, pg. 67). The link to madness here is interesting when understood as that which is abnormal, unconventional. Particularly when Reynolds situates the genre as functioning around crisis points, “the normal is always under attack” (1992, pg. 77). The normal that the supervillains present a threat to is not enacted purely through their actions, but also through their psychological state. Superheroes, on the other hand, defend the normal and are passive until the occurrence of crisis when they are called upon to reinstate the status quo.

Posthumanism and the Redefinition of Self

The field of posthumanism arose out of the anti-humanist movement that de-centred the white, male, human specific concept of subjectivity. The decentring of this subjectivity occurred through the acknowledgement of the validity of other experiences of the world, for example those of people of colour and females. This decentring was a wound dealt to the humanist narcissism that elevated the human, and especially “Man,” above and apart from all other lifeforms. I contend that the decentring of the humanist concept of “human” is perhaps the overriding foundational trauma in response to which contemporary society and selfhood has had to reconstitute and reorganise. Posthumanism is the theoretical response, influenced and supported by the work of minority and equality movements as well as the

pervasion of computer and mobile communications technology. The technologic utopian offshoot of this response is transhumanism which hopes for human perfectibility through technological upgrades to the human body and mind. As Cary Wolfe points out in his explanation of the posthuman, this view of the cyborg figure continues a humanist idealism of human perfectibility and so cannot be included as a *post*humanism (2009). Transhumanism, however, is still important to this thesis as these utopian hopes for the human, as well as the accompanying fears of external control and robot agency, are still present in the cultural imaginary.

Deconstructionism was a fundamental co-development with the posthuman as it also worked at destabilising essentialism. Guattari and Deleuze proposed the human as a position that is the result of an assemblage, that is a web of interconnected objects and entities and the forces that they exert. The model of the assemblage has important consequences for agency, subjectivity, and embodiment. Agency is nonexclusive to individual entities, instead it is the result of those actions between elements of the assemblage.

N. Katherine Hayles demonstrates that this view is ultimately linked not just to the idea of the assemblage, but to the embodiment of information. The information that both bodies and networked technology generate can interact and in doing so they help constitute one another. Using the example of the Turing test, Hayles conceives cognition as a process that is spread between the human and nonhuman objects involved in the thought and communication processes. In this model of posthumanism the self becomes a function, a self-organising subsystem that is “ignorant of the actual dynamics of [the] complex systems,” (2008, pg. 286) of which the human individual is only a part. The human body thus becomes a site of interaction, of production from interrelated forces. Hayles bemoans what she sees as the tendency of most of posthuman theory to erase the significance of the body and rely heavily instead upon the circulation of disembodied information. She points out that the erasure of the body is one of the continuations from liberal humanist conceptions of the self into posthuman thought.

Similarly, Donna Haraway‘s *A Cyborg Manifesto* remembers the body as a situated viewpoint from which the world is experienced but one that is ultimately linked with, to the

point of no real boundaries, the rest of matter including other species and technological devices. The manifesto poses the cyborg as an assemblage-like figure in which boundaries are dismantled “between the human and the animal, the organism and the machine, and the physical and the non-physical,” (Lynes, 2015, pg. 123). This cyborg is an interrelation of othered humans and the technoscientific era. Haraway’s proposal suggests that contemporary technology “enact[s] a qualitative shift in our understanding of how the human is constituted in its interaction with nonhuman others,” (Braidotti, 2015, pg. 681). It is a shift that destabilises hegemonic categories and power relations, an experience that is still being adjusted to. Following Hayles and Haraway, this thesis retains a focus on the body because the embodied experience of the human informs its self-construction. The case studies have been chosen in part for their own bodily focus or erasure. Superheroes developed from the visual form of the comic book and represent their trauma-oriented identity and their civilian-super alter-ego fragmentation through their different costumes. However, in the post-2008 iterations of the genre, the physical suffering of superheroes is rarely focused on, instead being solved by technological intervention. This solution is part of the transhumanist hope for human perfectibility through technological enhancement.

According to Rosi Braidotti, posthumanism is a theoretical framework that aims to generate alternative notions of subjectivity (2018). Posthumanism’s emphasis is on diversity rather than humanism’s universality. Whilst posthumanism seems to arise alongside technology, its focus is not wholly the effect of technology on the human but on the destabilising of conceptual boundaries between the human and nonhuman entities. In an era of convergence not just in experience of technology, but in the trans- and interdisciplinarity work of academia, as research fields overlap and multiply, the “critical posthumanities” arises as a radical ethical movement that can provide a multitude of perspectives from which to acknowledge and actualise “missing people”, those that have tended to be excluded from the allowed subject position (p. 11, Braidotti, 2018).

Moreover, the posthuman has grown to encompass elements of the post-anthropocene, the experience of living in a time where human life has caused irreparable damage to our environment and the importance of recognising nonhuman lifeforms and agency. Wolfe

posits that the posthuman must recognise the closed nature of self-reference that the human uses to understand itself and how it experiences the world (2009). In forgetting pre-existing notions of experience, more radical positions and understandings of connection and the human's place in a continuum of beings and matter can arise. Wolfe and Haraway, among others, expand their posthumanism to an understanding of animals' places within that nature-culture continuum. Whilst the species aspect of posthumanism is extremely important to understanding the decentred position of the human in an ecologically-mindful era, this thesis' case studies do not include nonhuman animal or plant species. At best, they are consumed or used as part of the background. Instead, this thesis focuses on the technological interaction and effect on the understanding of the human self and so will take forward those elements of posthuman thought, of the human and the self as epiphenomenons of complex systems or assemblages.

The notion of assemblages arises from Deleuze and Guattari's work on affect. I will begin by looking at Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomes and will move to explaining their use in posthuman thought. Rhizomes did not start out as actively posthuman but have been incorporated into posthuman thought, for example Rosi Braidotti's nomadic feminism.

Deleuze and Guattari present rhizomes as an alternative model of thought to the arborescent structure of traditional philosophy. As they point out themselves, this offering ironically creates an arborescent structure, that of the binary opposition. Arborescent structures rely on binary opposition, one to one relations like those between signifier and signified, they disallow alternatives, and assume a linear understanding of causality.

The alternative rhizome structure works on the in-between. The word rhizome comes from the botanical formation of a root system made up of nodes, made of starch and bulb, that are connected endlessly and multiply. There is no end or beginning to a rhizome as the nodes are joined at random and multiple times. Deleuze and Guattari's model of thought works in the same way. Their rhizome is formed of multiplicities of connections; not understood as a unified subject as in arboreal thought, but still conceived of as that multiplicity, irreducible. A rhizome is dependent upon desire, "it is always by rhizome that desire moves and produces," (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, pg. 14). That is, the movement of desire is and constructs the relations

between nodes. The nodes or material of the rhizome is “heterogenous” objects, be these actually material, or enunciations and signs (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, pg. 7). All points of a rhizome may and will be connected, or alternatively broken off at any point with new formations leading up to take its space, but not place, within the system. Rhizomes and multiplicities adjust with any change in the relations or qualities they comprise. Moreover, in exploring the rhizome, you do not repeat the formation like an arboreal system traces leaves, but produce something, generate something new. The importance of the rhizome model is the freedom for thought that it opens up. Any concepts can be connected, any materials and social organisations. These relations change with time, with experience, and thinking of them is specifically creative, productive, imaginative. To point out something seemingly superfluous but that’s relevance will become apparent, this development of a linear distribution, to one-to-many, to multi-relational nodes bears striking similarity to the changing modes of media and data distribution in the last century from one to many, many to many and the almost impossible to regulate peer to peer/one to one.

Rhizomes are a thought-model predicated on desire. This provides two problems, first is the lack of consideration for power, the other, a lack of other affects such as anxiety or fear. Working on a basis of desire seems to democratise the nodes and relations that constitute the rhizome, the nodes aren’t acting, their desires are causing them to act. This flat playing surface is what is fundamentally useful about a rhizomatic approach, free-flows of thought produce new and alternative knowledge. But what about when a desire is prevented from acting or is negated by the allowed cultural formations? Where is power in this free-flow? Having desire as the only energy producing a rhizome makes power, agency, and other affects secondary to desire which I see as difficult in our current terminology. Desire is generally considered as different to survival impulses or fear and as such I cannot see how rhizomatic relations and movements would be formed purely of desire. In valorising desire as the foundation of these systems, a perhaps unintentional hierarchy seems to form with desire at the top, and other affects as mere after-effects. Therefore, for this thesis’ approach, I would like to extend the understanding of rhizomatic relations from desire to affect in general. Extended to include these other forms of relations, certain similarities to cultural materialism may be seen, some useful for this thesis’ approach.

Cultural materialism takes as its focus literary texts, documents that when analysed in relation to their historical context provide insight into the dominant, emergent and residual practices and values of the time. Whilst not immediately evident as rhizomatic, this emphasis on the relations of culture as evidenced by a product of them seems to me a good starting point for rhizomatic analysis. A cultural product is a product of relations, relations of production but also of reception. It implies and contains and is produced by the rhizome in which it is also contained.

Similarly to cultural materialism, this thesis uses cultural products as an entry point into the contemporary, situated rhizome. My approach is different to Rosi Braidotti's political posthumanism and I shall shortly demonstrate my contrasting use of the term, but it is a political intervention itself. I will be examining the affect located and produced in these cultural products, tracking them out to their connecting conditions of production and reception to demonstrate a wider, rhizomatic transmission of affect that potentially destabilises neoliberalism even as it is produced by it.

The approach of this thesis to tracing affective dimensions within its selected case studies is also informed by Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea's work on neoliberalism's affects. Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea emphasise the affective dimension of neoliberal freedoms in, for example, the overwhelming responsibility to choose everything from "which hospital to be ill in, which lifestyle to adopt, which identity to fashion" generates "insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression," (2013, pg. 12). This includes fear of the consequences of personal responsibility for making the "wrong choice, " (Hall and O'Shea, 2013, pg. 12). Hence this rhizomatic, all encompassing "tangled mess" that is termed neoliberalism operates not just on desire, but anxiety and fear. Hall and O'Shea state that there is some hope against neoliberal hegemony in the existence of affects that act against neoliberal imperatives such as "empathy for others, a liking for co-operation rather than competition, or a sense of injustice," (Hall and O'Shea, 2013, pg. 21). These affects reflect some of the generic values of the superhero.

Moreover, the idea of the "wrong choice" and the moral weight it carries shall be argued in the conclusion of this thesis to produce the current interest of the superhero genre with idea

of multiverses and alternate timelines. The conceit of multiverses allows for exploration of characters making wrong and right decisions. However, as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in particular, represents in the conflicts it portrays between the morally good and bad versions of its characters, the neoliberal user is never entirely free from the guilt of the wrong decision regardless if it was the user that made the choice or whether the structure of its society or world is set up such that the wrong choice will always be made.

The rhizome model has proved useful to posthumanism in the decentring effect it has on approaches to subjectivity. Instead of considering a humanist, bounded and essential subjectivity attached to a stratification of white males of a particular wealth and education, subjectivity is regarded in relational terms and a multiplicity.

To provide an example of the rhizome in posthuman thought, I turn now to Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory. According to Braidotti, posthumanism is a theoretical framework that aims to generate alternative notions of subjectivity. Posthumanism's emphasis is on diversity rather than humanism's universality. Whilst posthumanism seems to arise alongside technology, its focus is not wholly the effect of technology on the human but on the destabilising of conceptual boundaries between the human and nonhuman entities. Braidotti proposes a framework for "critical posthumanities," (p. 31, 2019).

In an era of convergence not just in experience of technology, but in the trans- and interdisciplinarity work of academia, as research fields overlap and multiply, the "critical posthumanities" arises as a radical ethical movement that can provide a multitude of perspectives from which to acknowledge and actualise "missing people", those that have tended to be excluded from the allowed subject position (p. 11, Braidotti, 2019). Braidotti likens this cross-pollination to rhizomes as rhizomes provide pathways of thought around and away from hierarchal, territorialised traditional schemas of thought and analysis. In this framework, the philosopher is a nomadic subject, moving between ideas without regard for traditional limits.

Another example that might be given of the rhizome in posthumanism is Donna Haraway's cyborg. Haraway's 1985 Cyborg Manifesto poses the cyborg as an assemblage-like figure in which boundaries are dismantled "between the human and the animal, the organism and the

machine, and the physical and the non-physical," (Lynes, 2015, pg. 123). Assemblage is the term for a grouping of elements within a rhizomatic system, dependent on the desire running between them. Haraway's cyborg is the in-between, a state of relation between organic and technological matter. This relation however should not imply a binary opposition but an immanent integration, an assemblage constituted of multiple relations and modes of being. Haraway's proposal suggests that contemporary technology "enact[s] a qualitative shift in our understanding of how the human is constituted in its interaction with nonhuman others." It is a shift that destabilises hegemonic categories and power relations, an experience that is still being adjusted to. In this way the rhizome model provides a way to think of a material subjectivity in relational terms, as something that is the product of those desiring-connections rather than that which is producing those relations.

The understanding of posthumanism used in this thesis is dependent upon contemporary material conditions. Instead of, but related to, a political or philosophical approach to analysis, posthumanism is seen in this thesis as a specific, contemporary experience. Posthumanism is a consciousness of a state of relational being, of having a subjectivity that is produced by relation with human and nonhuman others. This is something not just experienced but produced by performances of the self online that are necessary in a networked neoliberal age. To demonstrate this, I shall propose that the internet itself is a rhizome, that neoliberalism causes a foregrounding of the self as relational, and that together these conditions have, particularly since around 2008, produced emergent posthuman subjectivities.

George P. Landow combines critical theory with computer science theory to demonstrate the relations between them when it comes to analysing hypertext. Hypertext is text displayed on a screen that connects to other texts through hyperlinks. This is a large part of how we experience the internet, although it doesn't constitute the whole world wide web. Landow first compares Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* to a print proto-hypertext, designed as it is to be entered from any point, and, as Landow quotes Stuart Moulthrop, "the reader's implicit task is to build a network of connections," (Multhrop in Landow, 1997, pg. 58). Effectively the reader is performing both the act of following hyperlink and producing that

hyperlink's connection in being the organising principle between line of flight and destination.

Landow points out other similarities such as informational hyperlinked webpages being plateaus, "a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end," (Deleuze and Guattari in Landow, 1997, pg. 59). The hyperlinked webpages are such as they are not ends in themselves but in between a host of other nodes, allowing movement freely and without direction. Landow does, however, draw the comparison short, explaining that whilst many similarities can be seen between hypertext and rhizomes the definition of rhizomes as being "composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in moments" rules out hypertext as a true rhizome. Instead, the rhizome "can serve as an ideal for hypertext," (Landow, 1997, pg. 61).

I would argue that Landow's analysis discounts the experience of the user, or at least does not consider it. Hypertext in and of itself may not be a true rhizome but acting across it is the individual user connected to hypertext through nonhuman material elements like the networked device they are using to access it. In terms of the users' experience of hypertext, their ability to follow their desires freely from one node to the next form a human-internet assemblage. In their use of their agency to perform these moves, the user is consciously aware of the power they have over but also their participation in a relational structure. The internet as rhizome is one aspect of the contemporary posthuman experience. Entering and performing in this rhizomatic structure means plugging in to the internet-machine, to the relations immanent in this access. In this way, relationality is foregrounded through everyday experience of communication through a distinctly, and visually, rhizomatic system.

Internet Sociology and Web Studies

Developments in communication and computer technology have allowed the social performances of self to multiply and become measurable. Whilst social scientists have approached networked technology, the focus has been on surveillance and the consequences of networked technology on modes of social control. For example, David Lyons (2002) discusses the role of data collection in the categorisation of individuals as an exertion of soft social control.

The consequences of networked technology on the actual construction and understanding of the self have only recently begun to be addressed. Because the networked self is primarily enacted through messaging, sharing, and presenting functional, desirable selves, studies of the networked self, such as those about to be discussed, have been focused on the consequences to the communication and external performance of self. This means that such studies are limited to what is performed, not what is felt, the motivating emotions and pressures behind the performances' construction.

To return to Goffman for a moment, in his last book *Forms of Talk* (1981) he applies his theories to mediated self-performances and describes how TV and radio presenters adjust their self-performances for an unknown and unseen audience. Their performances are necessarily restricted as to not be offensive to the majority of their imagined audience.

Mediated communication was causing restrictions on self-performances before the internet and widely available networked devices, but this was the experience for the precious few who became such presenters. Building on Goffman's interactionist model, Meyrowritz describes the experience of mediated technology as disconnected from the locales that mediated events are situated in. He goes as far as to attribute the social equality movements of the 1960s to television's democratisation of access to information because of the resultant collapse in class, gender, and age associated restrictions (Meyrowitz, 1985, pg. 309). Moreover, the feed of information now accesses the backstage of celebrity or media personalities self-performances. Meyrowritz doesn't connect this to neoliberalism which is a shame as it is a neoliberal individualism and all-pervasive conversion of performance into capital-generation that seems to drive this demystifying invasion of private lives.

Anthony Giddens' model of structuration, on the other hand, does explicitly connect consumer capitalism to mediated self-performance. Giddens explicitly connects the balance between individual agency and the replication of social with consumer capitalism. Mediated experiences display other individual's self-narratives which are then compared to, such as with celebrities. The self becomes a project the individual must work at to perform "not what we are, but what we make of ourselves," (Giddens, 1991, pg. 5). For this, individual's must constantly review and revise their performances in line with what they have previously

performed in order to present a coherent self-narrative to the world. This necessarily reduces the variation of self-performances an individual may make and hence reproduces the social power structures that the individual already finds themselves in.

Martin Conway's model of the Self-Memory System (SMS) provides psychological support to Giddens theory. The SMS conceives the self as produced not only from biographical detail but consists of a complex set of active goals and their associated self-images, for example for the self-image of being a parent, corresponding goals such as protecting and nurturing their children (Conway et al., 2009, pg. 595). Memory is a database of the self, providing autobiographical knowledge of both a semantic and episodic nature. This memory system must remain coherent by adapting "to make memory consistent with an individual's current goals, self-images, and self-beliefs," (Conway, 2005, pg. 595) through reflection upon, and the reencoding of memories. To reencode is to change the associations a memory holds so that the aspects of the memory relevant to current self-images will be emphasised in recall. The emphasis on memory within psychological self systems has interesting implications when applied to, or even derived from, recent works such as the *Westworld* (2016-2022) series as shall be done in chapter 6.

For now, the need for reencoding and coherence is particularly troubled by the networked performance of self. Internet archiving functions make previous self-images and their related self-performances accessible to anyone. These previous performances can potentially be weaponised against their performer as they reveal inconsistencies in self-performance. Notable examples include the recent firing of the director James Gunn from Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* in 2018 due to the resurfacing of 10 year old tweets that made offensive and morally dubious jokes, and fans' subsequent reaction to them. Celebrity examples such as this show that even people with established careers are at risk from their past self-performances. Gunn's tweets were recirculated by other media users once they had been discovered however these threats can emerge from non-human actors too.

Facebook's "Memories" feature displays to users their previous posts with an invitation to share the post again as a commemoration of the event. This occurs regardless of the user's level of attachment to the event. Similarly, Facebook's "Friendiversaries" may rudely awaken

memories of lost or discarded friendships by commemorating the date on which a friendship was first acknowledged on the site through the acceptance of a friend request, again with the invitation to share the post as part of the public performance of the relationship. The coherence expected to be performed by the Self Memory-System has a large potential to be disrupted or revealed as inconsistent at any time by human or non-human actors utilising online archives – a likely source of anxiety for networked selves. A rupture in the self-memory system can be brought on by these invasions of past selves into the present. This requires a conscious negotiation between current and past selves, and re-stabilisation of the current self-image. It can also be risk managed through the careful sculpting of online presences, also known as impression management.

Sherry Turkle's work expands the notion of anxieties around networked technology to include its paradoxical role in offline crises. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit,* published in 1984, explored the space computer technology offered self-projection, a "second self", where the individual can gain self-knowledge from play and coding rulesets. She updates this premise in her 2004 preface explaining that due to the rapid pervasion of networked technology since the book's original publication, it is now more accurate to describe it as a "new generation of self," (Turkle, [1985] 2005, pg. 5). Whilst an individual's self-conception dependent upon their relationship with technology, computer programs that are engaged with today are done so from a point of interacting with pre-existing programs. This means that there is no need for the majority of people to code their own programs in which to "identity play," (Turkle, [1985] 2005, pg. 7).

Turkle's later research displayed the other, more reassuring use of networked technology. She collects anecdotes of an insecurity of connection in relation to the 9/11 Twin Tower attacks when loved ones were not readily available for emotional reassurance (2011, pg. 246). Despite the pressure of networked technology upon self-performances, the availability of networked devices like smartphones have become a kind of safety blanket or protective talisman promising that if any danger or crises should occur you will be able to contact those you love; "to feel safe, you have to be connected," (Turkle, 2011, pg. 247).

If the self is something that is produced out of its social relations and its existence within a

particular culture, then the specific experience of a self under neoliberalism is both unique and newly experienced in the post-network era. This thesis takes the superhero genre and posthuman explorations such as *Westworld* (2016-2022) as expressions of contemporary experience. These cultural products invite participation in the affectual experience of this society by representing the anxieties and risks, potential liberation and reorganisation of consciousness, power, and agency for the audience to imaginatively experience and affectually work through their own feelings.

The amount of pressure that the individual is under to present themselves in a manner attractive to capital production is various and damaging. People are driven to burn out, the utter inability to be productive, because of the ever present need to increase their rate and amount of output. This anxiety is seized upon as another commercial opportunity with escapist media marketed towards the overburdened. *The Networked Self*, an edited series of books published in 2011 and 2019, explores the variety of ways these self-performances are elicited and play out. danah boyd's (2011) essay from these collections, "Social Network Sites and Networked Publics", proposes that SNSs affordances shape how individuals manage, maintain, and plan their online self-performances. This foregrounds the collapse of contexts of reception for self-performances in the widely accessible SNSs. Social experiences can be more easily shared across social groupings, be that class, race, or geographically located groups, and individuals must consider the range of possible audiences when producing their self-performance online. Boyd reminds us that some professions such as journalism and politics have had to deal with unseen, unknowable audiences for a long time before it became a general experience of those with access to networked technology. Nonetheless, the concepts of public and private are also collapsing, and new methods of control are being developed by participants in networked society to maintain privacy even in non-traditional forms.

Conversely, the active use of social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter are seen to enable the conversion of latent social ties into weak ties and hence increase the social capital of participants, particularly those with low self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2011).

Wahl-Jorgsen also presents evidence that they produce arenas where prosocial and positive

emotions are encouraged, or at least performances of them (2018). This will become more important in the discussion of superheroes. In a neoliberal, double-bind of public identity, the social performance of self limits the variety of self-performances that cohere with our personal brand, even without celebrity or microcelebrity status. Further to this, studies on social media use reflect that, online impressions must be micromanaged to generate a branded self of a professional or otherwise desirable persona for other purposes of capital accumulation (Gilpin 2011; Marwick 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018; Hearn 2008).

When every aspect of online self-performance has the potential for monetisation, but also where the capital-producing aspects of self are the “successful” ones, data harvesting is all the more horrific even when the data is anonymised. Remembering Turkle’s research on individual’s technological reliance for self-expression and understating, it is not metrics but parts of selves that are being collected, at least in relation to the individual. Hence, during the recent Cambridge Analytica and Facebook data collection scandals, the outrage was both at lost capital and personal attack.

Furthermore, critics, like Wendy Brown (2015), have recognised the rise of self-help media as part of a response to neoliberal demands for individualist self-improvement and self-regulation. There seems to have been an increase in media and governmental discussion about anxiety and other mental health concerns following the 2008 global financial crisis and ensuing recession. I propose that this shift mirrors the reliance of networked neoliberalism on the production of self. To maintain the production of affective self performance, mental health must be carefully managed. The self and creative or emotional labour can then become a reliable source of content that supports the circulation of capital. Whilst it may seem like struggles with mental health and anxiety must be conquered to be productive, the narration of such experiences in the production of online self performances can be as rich a source for affecting content. This is another paradox of networked neoliberalism.

Multi-platform performances of the self spark anxieties because of the need to perform selves to other people’s expectations of what we should be. The superhero genre responds to these imperatives by offering, as Danny Fingeroth points out, a fantasy of being more who others think you are in the secret superpowered alter ego of the average civilian (2004).

Additionally, superheroes play out frustrations and anxieties of less-than-perfect traits being found out. Superheroes experience and perform a similar self-management exercise to maintain trust in their selfless attitude, and for fear of their own secret civilian identities being found out and their freedom and loved ones endangered.

As a final note on the networked, neoliberal self, the case studies this thesis uses have partly been selected because of their commercial exploitation of networked communication. The contemporary experience of the online self has been referred to as the *res digitalis* by Joohan Kim (2001). Applying Heidegger's concepts of *dasein* and *mitsein* to computer-mediated communication (CMC), Kim argues that CMC brings about a new experience of being immaterially with others, existing in relation to them online without time or space specificities, and especially without the notion of an accessible original as all digital information can be replicated without noticeable difference.

This understanding of online interaction enables companies and fiction media products to act as selves, that is to present their communicative acts online as a self performance by employing the same methods and media that individual humans do. Their online performances are similarly geared towards impression management to produce desirable traits and generate parasocial investment from potential consumers. These aims are achieved by individual human employees acting under the name of the company, however, the way they are encountered and experienced online is almost imperceptibly different from interacting with strangers online.

This experience is complicated by the use of websites that purport to exist in the realm of the fictions that the companies create. For example, HBO's *Westworld* (2016-2022) series has two websites for the Delos company, the company which controls the park and robots whose stories are followed in the series. This website has bots that the user can interact with, and that have had updated dialogue to reflect the developments in the series.

Marvel opens its fictional worlds differently. By producing products representative of different characters, by having real world experiences like tours of SHIELD training areas, and other arenas to engage in the parallel but fictional worlds of the superhero, Marvel invites the consumer to partake in its quasi-self performance, encouraging the sharing of experiences

and representation of the story in the real world by wearing the symbols of it. Through their consumer and remixable actions, the fans generate a collective identity out of multitudes of individual expressions oriented towards the Marvel fictional universes.

Affective Dimensions: Raymond Williams' Structures of Feeling and Plantinga's Moral Agents

To set up for the explanation of this thesis' methodology, I will end this literature review with an overview of aspects related to affectivity and the body. This is to inform the understanding of my methodological approach. Firstly, Raymond Williams' structures of feelings has been an influential concept in this thesis' approach to analysis. Structures of feeling are orientations to the world, felt lived experiences of the world from a particular perspective, that are shared across particular identity groups. These structures of feeling can be difficult to determine, because these felt experiences are generally considered private, personal, and in isolation from dominant (and their subsidiaries) cultural formations. However, as Williams suggests, through the close reading of cultural artefacts, it is possible to identify structures of feeling that are prominent within our society.

Williams, however, never describes how to determine if a structure of feeling is dominant within the society that the cultural artefact belongs to. I propose that the popularity of the superhero genre suggests a resonance between its portrayal, and potentially its evocation, of specific affects and the dominant structures of feeling in contemporary US society. This proposal is not certain, especially if we take Hall's encoding/decoding theory into account. Hall suggests that individuals have the potential to interpret cultural media either in line with its intended meanings, in opposition to them, or some mix; Thus, popularity doesn't automatically align with audience agreement but it does suggest some form of audience engagement with the implied meanings behind the works.

Moreover, as critics such as Rick Altman (1984) propose, genre's themselves replicate structures of feeling. Altman argued that genres use tropes to produce specific cultural meanings and feelings within the audience. However, genres are not wholly dictated by the feelings of the audience, although the popularity of certain genres with audiences is a strong

incentive for the replication of the representational strategies used; business interests and priorities also factor in the shape that iterations of a genre take. Relevant to the thesis is the idea that structure of feeling can be carried through a cultural artefact, thereby demonstrating the importance of examining the superhero genre's recent iterations to determine the structures of feelings arising from networked neoliberalism. The thesis, however, is interested in the specific effects on the conceptualisation of self, how then to go about investigating these effects?

As described earlier, a self is not something that is seen. The self is a concept and one that can be interpreted as being conjured out of repeated performances of self (Butler 1988, 1999). It has previously been conceptualised in various forms such as a dualism of body and soul. The modernist human conception prioritised rationality and mastery of nature and other humans above all. A shift in the mid-20th century saw postmodernism and posthuman strands of theory reconceptualise the self as an epiphenomenon of human consciousness rather than an essential and exceptional feature of humanity.

However, through all these conceptions, one things has remained the same – that of the location of the self in the body it inhabits and controls, whether this is conceptualised as the biological matter responsible for the generation of self, or whether the self is considered a separate concept like or equivalent to the mind in opposition to and above the body as mere matter. Prioritisation of the body can be seen in the work of Hayles and Haraway, but also in Williams' structures of feeling which speaks to the material conditions the embodied individual lives through (Highmore, 2016). The body, however, is not the sole location of the expression of the self – our way into self, other people's selves is through their performance of it in their looks, their words, their physicality, their clothing, opinions, so much of their self is expressed corporeally or through their communication with us of whatever form.

Following this prioritisation of the embodiment of the self, this thesis combines the concept of an embodied self with Plantinga's concept of moral agents, that is fictional characters as moral agents that represent persons (2018). Plantinga suggests that, through facial expressions and character arcs, an affectual relationship is encouraged between the viewer and characters. The cuing of affect encourages us to suspend our disbelief and believe in

the reality of the characters, specifically their person- or selfhood. As rational beings we can be aware that characters are fictional, they do not exist, could even be considered as an epiphenomenon of the film production – but as humans, as emotional creatures that can suspend their disbelief, characters can also be registered as other humans, as individuals, as selves being performed. Characters' selves are accessible as any other self, with occasional greater insight due to techniques that render their psychic lives visible or audible through narration or visual distortion. The primary location of these performances of self, or actions which can be inferred by folk psychology to be representative of self, is the body and the representation of the body's interactions with the material world. Therefore, I will be investigating character and the body as representative of particular models of self that cultural products are using or proposing.

Similarly to Barbara M. Kennedy (2000), I will be thinking of the body further than its physical, visual and felt boundaries. Kennedy explains that her reason for this is that sensation and subjectivity is caught up in the body and as the body, the body flows further than physical boundaries because it is also the psychic sensations, the interaction with materiality that causes the body to be a thing. The body is just one element of the assemblage of our lived embodied experiences, just as subjectivity is just another of those elements.

Kennedy commonly uses "mind/body/subjectivity" when referring to this assemblage and mentions how post-Deleuzean critics have taken issue with the severe number of neologisms that Deleuze and Guattari use to demonstrate their theories. However, when body can mean such a variety of things but never mind because of the dualisms set up with Enlightenment thought and language, neologisms are a necessary strategy for introducing new forms of thought and new images/metaphors. I see this as a primary reason that Kennedy resorts to using slashes - the concepts, separate as they are, are drawn together through their placement within a single signifier "mind/body/subjectivity". They remind me of the entanglement theories of Barad, these imbricated energies that separated would fall to nothingness.

I, however, have further reason for needing a new way to approach the "body". This is due to

the superhero genre's treatment of the body and visuality, social media's use of visuality and the body, and lastly (post-modern) identity signification through visual signs.

It is not a new phenomenon for humans to express their identity through clothing, and other visual symbols. However, postmodernity and the visual affordances of networked technologies have exemplified this link, with commercial objects bearing the symbols of media characters and companies logos standing for the political affiliation or values of the individual who buys and wears them. This highlights the suitability of the superhero as a figure through which to explore contemporary networked culture; just like superheroes, we are wearing our values on our costumes. What is needed then is an understanding of the body as being, not just the anatomical body, but the range of associated symbols and readings of identity signification.

Conclusion

As explored, this thesis draws on affect studies, internet studies, and superhero studies to support its examination of networked neoliberalism's effects on the self and the representation of those effects within the superhero genre. In detailing the thesis' engagement with these fields, I have highlighted the development of networked neoliberalism in response to cultural phenomena such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the concurrent rise of ubiquitous networked media. Furthermore, I have established networked neoliberalism as an evolution of late capitalism with a longer historical trajectory. By exploring contemporary debates and reflections in the field of internet sociology, I have demonstrated the emergent concerns surrounding networked neoliberalism's impact on the self. Additionally, by examining the themes in superhero studies, I have demonstrated that the relevance and importance of the superhero in determining the affects of networked neoliberal selfhood arise not just from the genre’s contemporary popularity, but the suitability of the figure in exploring cultural anxieties and questions over the representation of identity.

My thesis’ contributions to these fields come from two major directions. Within superhero studies, this thesis reflects on the underexplored relationship between the genre and networked neoliberalism. While previous studies have separately examined the genre's

engagement with identity and technology, the crossover inherent in our relationship with social media and the web for capital production remains largely unexplored. This thesis contributes to the field by exploring this relationship in depth.

Moreover, rather than merely looking at thematic concerns, I will use close reading to uncover the superhero genre's specific representational strategies as they evolve alongside the naturalisation of mobile and ubiquitous web-connected technology. For example, I will be analysing the use of visual strategies such as camera movement and superimposition to replicate the sensation of the user's navigating online, virtual spaces.

In so doing, I propose that the superhero genre is remarkable for its replication of user sensations to provide an anchoring for the sensation in media; the alienation of the sensation inviting the viewer's critical reflection on networked neoliberalism's interpellation of them as "produsers" (Jenkins, 2006). The term produsers refers to the simultaneous roles of individuals on the web as being both users of networked technology and major producers of the content that the web consists of. Whilst Jenkins focused on the affordances of convergence media in allowing media consumers to become producers of media through remixing and original content production, I use the term to invoke the idea that, due to the same affordances, the user is expected to produce such content.

In the subsequent chapter, I will provide a more detailed explanation of the theoretical frames of reference of the thesis.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

This thesis aims to elucidate the alternative subjectivities that arise from the presentation of selves in the 2008-2020 wave of superhero genre media's interplay with then-contemporary relations with networked media. By analysing the portrayal of characters in superhero films and television shows, this study seeks to understand how the genre reflects and engages with the societal structures and feelings prevalent in its contexts of production.

To investigate this, I undertook close readings of selected films and television shows to conduct a detailed analysis of character representation and the representation of elements of networked and social media. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the formal features and thematic elements that contribute to the construction of the self in the superhero genre. Attention was given to tracking character arcs and identifying how they evolve over time, providing valuable insights into the development of self-identity. The analysis also considered the interplay between the visual and narrative aspects of the genre, examining how formal features such as cinematography, editing, and sound design contribute to the representation of characters as producing selves.

In selecting the case studies for this research, I focused on superhero texts that explore themes of self-representation as a prominent feature of the narrative. The selection process took into account several factors, including the popularity, cultural significance, and relevance of the case studies to the research question. Specifically, I sought out texts that effectively engage with features of networked neoliberalism, such as web affordances like archives, data, and anonymity, as evident in their narratives.

I selected a range of texts from across the post-2008 period to provide an overview of the development of the superhero genre's representational strategies alongside the development of networked neoliberalism as a dominant feature of US society.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the development of the superhero genre's representational strategies alongside the rise of networked neoliberalism in US society, I chose a range of texts from the post-2008 period. These texts also reflect a diversity of

wealth positions, protagonist identities (such as white male, white female, and ensemble casts representing various ethnicities and genders), and narrative focuses (individual and ensemble), allowing for an exploration of how networked neoliberalism's effects on self-conceptualisation intersect with different identity signifiers within society.

In the following sections, I will provide an overview of the theoretical work that provides a frame of reference for this thesis' approach.

Posthuman Frameworks

> The aim of an adequate cartography is to bring forth alternative figurations or conceptual personae for the kind of knowing subjects currently constructed.
>
> (p. 34, Braidotti 2018)

> How does a culture understand and process new modes of subjectivity? Primarily through the stories it tells, or more precisely, the narratives that count as stories in a given cultural context.
>
> (p. 322, Hayles 1995)

Within visual media, characters are generally portrayed as people; individuals with selfhood. Plantinga's concept of moral agents, which considers fictional characters as moral beings capable of representing persons and eliciting affectual responses from viewers, informs this thesis approach to understanding the ways in which characters function as selves (2018). However, my analysis also incorporates posthuman frameworks, which expand the understanding of the self beyond its limited confinement to the physical body. In this, the thesis' approach is primarily informed by Rosi Braidotti's development of the figure of the nomadic subject.

The idea of the nomad, upon which Braidotti bases this political consciousness, arises from Deleuze and Guattari's work in *A Thousand Plateaus* where they describe the nomad as an orientation to territories, one that traces movement across and between the boundaries and territories constructed by static hegemonic categorisation (pg 328, Deleuze and Guattari 1996 [1988]). In her development of this political project, Braidotti also draws upon the works of Teresa de Lauretis and Adrienne Rich to argue for opposition to teleological theoretical traditions that can reinforce master positions through the use of canon. Instead, she aims to employ frameworks that "can help [her] think about change, transformation, living transitions"

(p. 30, Braidotti 1994).

Nomadic consciousness is the shape that this framework takes as “a form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity,” (p. 23, Braidotti 1994). Braidotti’s anti-humanist outlook flows from a need to develop freedom from hegemonic power relations that are predicated on the exclusion and othering of some forms of subjectivity, such as the non-male, non-white, non-rational forms of subject. Her objective is to move away from the unitary, fixed subject of humanist tradition and towards “a more complex and relational subject framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy, and desire as core qualities,” (p. 26, Braidotti 2013b). This thesis engages in an analogous political project in bringing forth the alternative subjectivities represented in contemporary superhero media, and in its final case study of *Watchmen* (2019), the potential of the re-inscription of hegemonic identity hierarchies.

The thesis does undertakes this project by utilising Braidotti’s nomadic subject as a frame of reference for understanding the potential forms of self. The nomadic subject is a figuration akin to Deleuze’s rhizomes and Haraway’s cyborg that I shall discuss at the end of this section (p. 23, Braidotti 1994). Figurations, Braidotti explains, are “politically informed images that portray the complex interaction of levels of subjectivity.” (p. 4, Braidotti 1994). The purpose of a figuration is to help us think through these levels of subjectivity, the complex interactions of “will with desire” (p. 120, Braidotti 1994), and the subjects that our present moment constructs or enables (p. 34, Braidotti 2019). Most importantly, figurations allow us to think through these possible forms of subject without curtailing this fruitful line of flight with boundaries of “a normative model of subjectivity” (p. 34, Braidotti 2019).

Braidotti explicates the nomadic subject’s purpose and originality as a concept by comparing it to the similar figures of the exile and the migrant. All three share a position typically on the outside of hegemonic culture. The exile has been forcefully abjected from their society. They are perceived as foreign and are typically in a “hostile” relationship with their host country. The migrant, on the other hand, chooses to move between locations and their movement has purpose (p. 380, Deleuze and Guattari 1996 [1988]). The nomad’s movement has no purpose except in that it purposefully moves against territorialising logic and fixed boundaries

(p. 24, Braidotti 1994). Territorialising is the process by which normally fluid forces of affective intensity become shaped and organised into rational, bounded categories and locations.

This thesis approaches its texts with this nomadic subject in mind. However, this thesis also sees the nomadic subject as a figuration that belongs to a philosophical, political theory. This thesis contends that the superhero is the popular figuration for representing possible alternative subjectivities that are enabled by then-contemporary relationships with networked media. Similar to the nomad, migrant and exile, the superhero has similarly been perceived as an outsider (Gibson, Huxley, and Ormrod 2015; Jones 2004). The superhero is never fully integrated into their society, instead occupying a position that oscillates between their immanent civilian role and their extrinsic super alter ego. Like the nomad, the superhero moves across and between sedimented social categories.

The nomadic subject, then, emerges as a stark contrast to the traditional humanist conception of identity. The opposition of the nomadic subject to the humanist subject is reinforced by its lack of singularity and fixed origin. As Braidotti outlines, Deleuze's philosophical framework “entails a total dissolution of the notion of a center and consequently of originary sites or authentic identities of *any* kind.” (p. 5, Braidotti 1994). Braidotti echoes this sentiment, advocating for the cultivation of a "nomadic consciousness" that embraces contingency and mobility over fixity (pg 31, Braidotti 1994). Again, movement or dynamism is emphasised as a key feature of nomadic subjectivity. This notion shall be explored with the case studies of *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) and *Westworld* (2016-2022) who visualise dynamism and movement in their presentation of their character’s selves.

Of particular relevance to this thesis’ aim is the idea of the nomad rejecting a permanent and fixed identity in favour of temporary connections and identifications. Braidotti’s metaphor “the nomad has no passport or too many of them,” (p. 33, 1994) has interesting resonance with the 21st century’s platform culture. In April 2023, there were approximately 5.18 billion individuals using the internet and 4.80 billion unique social media profiles (*Data Reportal* 2023). This number represents almost 60% of the global population. However, it is unlikely that these unique social media platforms represent that many individuals. Instead, social

media users actively engage with an average of 6.6 different social media platforms, six sites with their own profile requirements and normative expected forms of content (*Data Reportal* 2023). The user performs their self across multiple platforms or sites, each with their own aesthetics and requirements (van Dijck 2013). As such, users are challenged to maintain coherence whilst performing and taking on the temporary connections afforded by the platform's structure.

The user's "passport" is therefore not just necessarily multiple, the acts of electing to participate in the creation of such a "passport" or temporary identification is visible, captured as data or content on the platform's structure to be shared with others and archived for further interaction (Hearn 2008). This is part of the historical and social contexts that the commercial success of superhero media in the early 21st century is surrounded by. The thesis takes these superhero texts as cultural artefacts exploring the possible alternative subjectivities that may be enabled by these experiences of digital networked media.

This thesis understands the fluidity of boundaries associated with the nomadic subject to be a consequence of the subject's production from an assemblage. An assemblage is a formation made up of relations between physical objects, affective forces, concepts, social discursive formation and more. Assemblages are temporary, they shift, and it is the interaction across the nodes or elements that make up assemblages that constitute the whole or epiphenomenon that we can recognise. Braidotti describes subjectivity as a product of "assemblages that flow across and displace the binaries," (p. 33, Braidotti 2018). The thesis applies this concept to the subjectivities it looks for in the selected case studies.

Rather than understanding the superhero identity as singular, with an authentic origin and clear, fixed boundaries, the thesis looks to the diegetic and non-diegetic elements contributing to the identity of the superhero as an assemblage. To provide an example from the first case study, the superhero identity of Iron Man is made up from the diegetic elements of Tony Stark, the human body, the technological and modular suit, the AI JARVIS that inhabits the suit and other networked technological objects in Stark's vicinity (Curtis 2013a). Similarly, the character of Iron Man is made up from these diegetic elements as well as the audience's paratextual understanding of the character, the film's editing and cinematic

devices, the person of Robert Downey Jr., any interviews provided etc. (Koh 2014). Iron Man is therefore an assemblage formed from the shifting interplay of these elements across boundaries such as real/fictional, diegetic/non-diegetic, human/nonhuman.

In examining the superhero self as a product of an assemblage, this thesis conducts a close reading to explore the relationships among elements contributing to the text's portrayal of such a self. To clarify, this thesis uses the term self to indicate the persona of the superhero and their negotiation and performance of identity. This is in part based on Braidotti's description of subjectivity as "an expanded self whose relational capacity is not confined within the human species, but includes non-anthropomorphic elements," (pg. 36, Braidotti 2018) as the thesis looks beyond the singular subject for those relations and posthuman expansions. The starting point for this investigation, however, is the superhero's body. This thesis prioritises the superhero's body as the initial focal point for analysis because it serves as the visual representation to the audience of the self being presented. In doing so, the thesis integrates two related perspectives: Rosi Braidotti's concept of the nomadic subject and Carl Plantinga's idea of moral agents.

Within visual media, characters are generally portrayed as people; individuals with selfhood. Plantinga's concept of moral agents considers fictional characters as moral beings capable of representing persons and eliciting affectual responses from viewers (2018). This concept contributes to the ways in which the thesis considers the characters to function as selves.

In particular, Plantinga focuses on cinematographic features, such as scene duration and closeups, that prioritise the face as a "scene of empathy," (1999). Facial expressions are a site of the expression of affect, for example of happiness or sadness through tears. The viewer must take a range of emoitonal cues into account, such as the mood of any accompanying music, to interpret the emotion being experienced by the character. The identification of these emotions and motivations within narrative action is what allows the viewer to interpret the character as a person (2018).

Whilst Plantinga does look to scenic elements such as lighting and costume as elements of this representation of persons, the locus of the character remains the body of the actor portraying them. This thesis, however, takes a wider approach to the concept of the body

through its posthuman frames of reference.

Like some posthuman theorists, such as N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, Braidotti does centre the body in her explanation of the nomadic subject. As Braidotti writes;

> The body, or embodiment, of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological. (p. 4, 1994)

Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles points to the potential of posthumanism to oppose humanism by ensuring "embodied actuality rather than disembodied information," (p. 287, Hayles 1999) is prioritised. However, Hayles warns us this potential will only be fulfilled if the right trends of thought are followed in posthuman theory, rather than a continued perception of the boy as being a mere "support system for the mind" (p. 288, 1999). This thesis' case study of *Westworld* grapples with the shift between these posthuman conceptions. As chapter 6 explores, the characters in *Westworld* (2016-2022) are literal cyborgs in the sense that they are cybernetic organisms with technological organs and skeleton but organic skins. However, the series' presentation of repeated failures of human selves to function away from their biological bodies and the cyborgs' refusal to inhabit any body that is not designated as their for anything but a brief period opposes the belief in a separation between the mind and the body.

With Braidotti's explanation of the importance of embodiment, it is important to understand the subject as being the product of a web of relations. These categories of physical, symbolic, and sociological feed into each other in our perception and construction of the subject. Our comprehension of a person as a subject, even ourselves, is shaped by the hegemonic logics of these categories. As such, the subject is inscribed on a bedrock of hegemonic associations (p. 12, Braidotti 1994).

Braidotti continues to suggest that this network or assemblage of relations can be used as a jumping off point for the formation of new knowledge and alternative subjectivities (p. 31, 1994). The potential for new and fluid constructions arises from a nomadic consciousness focused towards the ethical and affective embrace of relations with multiple others (p. 32,

2013a). The feedback of affective force and power through these relations is what enables production of different subjects. Whilst all case studies contain some element of affective force, the second case study of *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) exhibits the most obviously visual representation of affect in its colourful distortion of the frame during Jessica's emotional flashbacks.

The thesis approaches its selected case studies with the understanding that such webs of relations can be captured and visualised in texts as cultural artefacts. The superhero, the thesis proposes, is a new "social imaginary" or figuration apt for the capture and retelling of the new webs of social relations enabled by our networked world (p. 36, Braidotti 2013a). The time period chosen for analysis saw the rise and habituation of some 5 billion people to the internet, social media, and expectations for the performance of self online (*Data Reportal* 2023). This technology of self flows back on the construction of the subject, potentially enabling the construction of possible alternative subjectivities (Cover 2014).

The final concept that this thesis utilises from Braidotti's theory in its approach to posthuman selves is critical cartographies. Braidotti proposes that the mechanism through which the feminist philosopher can construct their nomadic subject is through a critical cartography. A critical cartography is a retrospective mapping of the individual's lines of flight from territories that would normally shape or constrain the subject into hegemonic norms (p. 34, 2018). In the first case study of the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008-2013), these territories are materialised in the location of rural Afghanistan opposing the hegemonic, commercial USA.

The traces from which the nomadic subject can be mapped are produced from affective forces that "[propel] us forth" yet are unreachable themselves as they are "preconscious" and "prediscursive" (p. 14, Braidotti 1994). Therefore, for all nomadic subjects "identity is a retrospective notion" constructed out of the "traces of *where* we have already been" (pg. 14, Braidotti 1994). For this, Braidotti pulls on Butler's conception of the self as being generated from the performances of self to indicate a stable identity from which the self flows forth. What these repeated performances indicate instead, however, is the lack of a humanist essential self that these performances are understood to conjure (Butler 1988, 1999).

Whilst it does not directly inform the theoretical framework in terms of its posthumanism, I

would like to highlight here that the internet has also been argued to be an affective plane (Dean 2010: Papacharissi 2014: Wahl-Jorgensen 2018; Beloff 2018). Jodi Dean, for example, proposes that communication online is a “circulation of affect”. This affect builds on top of the material structures of the web to provide the motivation for users to move across hyperlinks and nodes that compose the internet’s network. This contributes to an understanding of the affordances of the web as potentially enabling a posthuman experience, through this prioritisation of affect and relational movement.

The archiving of user’s interactions online or the capture of them through data harvesting methods, similarly allows for a reconstruction of identity from the traces of the user’s past movements across virtual space (Young 2018). This feature is just one of many features of the digital networked context of production that the superhero genre can be understood to be interacting with. The archive as a feature will be returned to in chapter 5 as it is central to *Jessica Jones’* (2015-2019) interplay with contemporary engagement with the web.

The concept of the critical cartography further informs this thesis’ approach to its close reading of the selected case studies in its relationship to power. A critical cartography is supposed to not only track the construction of subjectivity, but it is also necessary “to expose power both as entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia)” (p. 33, Braidotti 2018). Braidotti pulls on Foucault’s understanding of power here. Entrapment refers to the quality of power that constrains an individual's action and formation in the world. Entrapment is about domination and hierarchies, operating through such mechanisms as surveillance, disciplining of the body and normalising of desirable behaviour. Empowerment, on the other hand, enables the individual’s expression and collective action. As I shall relate further on in this chapter, this double bind of entrapment and empowerment is also a feature of the affordances of networked media and is another feature of network media that the superhero genre can be seen to be responding to.

This thesis integrates this concept of critical cartography into its approach to close reading by considering the superhero self as the end point in this cartography. Rather than producing a feminist nomad from the traces of affective history, this thesis sees the superhero as the figuration produced by affective forces and undertakes a critical cartography to examine the

traces left by these forces - where has the superhero developed from, which of these forces arise from our digital objects, and, taking the superheroes of the selected texts as individual figurations in their multiplicity, how are these selves produced from these forces. Braidotti's proposed affective nature of these traces informs the thesis' approach in its exploration of affects and emotions within the texts as part of the assemblage producing the superhero self.

I will provide a final note on the thesis' utilisation of Braidotti's theory before briefly outlining the thesis' refusal of the cyborg figure as an analogous framework. Braidotti begins from a feminist standpoint. Her theory aims to provide *feminist* alternative subjectivities, or at the very least enable feminist alternative subjectivities to resist patriarchal hegemonic discursive formations. Her 1994 explanation of the differences curtailed and consumed by advanced capitalism foregrounded sexual difference as "a founding, fundamental difference, on which all others rest and that cannot be dissolved easily," (p. 118, Braidotti 1994). By 2019, Braidotti had expanded her concept of sexual difference to include both "becoming-woman/LGBTQ+" (p. 40, 2018) as this central difference. Sexual difference, then, remains in Braidotti's theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities (2018) but expands to encompass alternatives to the male/female binary.

Braidotti's centring of sexual difference is partly a bid to oppose Deleuze's ignorance of the figure of Woman. Braidotti describes Deleuze as seeing sexual difference as just one difference among many, and continuing to other Woman in viewing Her as the difference that nomadic philosophers must move through (p. 118, Braidotti 1994). This thesis does not disagree that reducing sexual difference to one among many weakens the feminist political project for equity. However, Braidotti comes close to essentialising sexual difference and, in particular, female forms of reproduction in her expounding of technology's effect on traditional categories; "If we follow the logic of biopower, women will be forcefully removed from the traditional forms of motherhood, based on heterosexual patriarchal family, to equally masculine high-tech reproduction," (p. 122, Braidotti 1994).

This thesis takes a different position. This thesis understands that no matter how important and impacting on people's experience of the world, sexual difference must be one difference among other categories associated with the body such as race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity

(e.g. hooks 1984). This thesis, therefore, does not prioritise the determination of sexual difference's contribution to subject formation. Instead, the thesis remains alert to these wider sociocultural categories associated with bodily identity in intersectional, lived experience, whilst prioritising as the object of its investigation the impact of digital technologies on the superhero's representations of multiple identities. The importance of intersectional lived experience in the formation of alternative subjectivities becomes particularly relevant in the final two case studies of *Westworld* (2016-2020) and *Watchmen* (2019). In the former, non-white identities are dispersed through the park in a pattern that indicates their distance from normative, white male subject-, or even person-, hood. In the latter, race is directly approached as a significant lived experience that affects a subject's perception and interaction with the world; leading to questions about the ethics of online anonymity and sharing of experiences.

In sum, the nomadic subject is the primary understanding this thesis has of self. This informed my close reading as I purposefully looked for the assemblages that make up a character. This informs my reading of their self or subjecthood as being produced out of the relations between cinematic devices and narratives, their body(/ies) and their relationship with technological objects and non-human subjects.

My aim with this close reading is to demonstrate the potential alternative subjectivities produced by the superhero genre's interplay with digital objects and activities. The close readings look at the self as an entity that can change and digital objects / activities as informing this change in the conceptualisation of self. The close reading also looks at the feelings associated with these selfhoods to explore how the genre presents these changes and possible alternative subjectivities. In this, I follow Braidotti's political aims of the nomadic consciousness to produce alternative subjectivities to resist hegemonic power discursively shaping the subject in an othering of certain identity formations.

This thesis's approach is informed to a lesser extent than Braidotti's nomadic subject by Donna Haraway's cyborg. The cyborg impacts this thesis approach only in the technological focus in its relationality. Like the nomad, the cyborg is an assemblage formed across binary categories; "suggesting the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of

boundaries in the personal body and the body politic," (p. 170, Haraway 1991). It is in this embodiment of permeability that the cyborg similarly challenges hegemonic humanist singularity and fixity.

Haraway proposes that the cyborg figuration is made possible by the emergence of microelectronics and related technological systems (p. 165, 1991). The replication without origin of machinic code as well as the agency and cognitive ability of networked technology ensures that the "'integrity' or 'sincerity' of the Western self gives way," (p. 163, 1991).

However, Haraway's examples largely focus on prosthetic technologies or industrial technological systems such as military intelligence systems or medically-aided reproduction. This thesis, and indeed Haraway herself towards the end of *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), envisages cyborgs as needing no prosthesis to be cyborgs. The interaction of technology and the human body can persist imaginatively; it can exist in a dispersed or distributed form with multiple objects contributing, for example, to a collective effort of cognition (p. 32, Hayles 2016). This is a change in the figuration of the cyborg necessary for its relevance in 21st century habituation and naturalisation of relations with networked devices.

The cyborg was an appropriate figure for the 1980s, both theoretically and culturally. As Haraway explains, her "Cyborg Manifesto was written to find political direction in the 1980s in the face of hybrids 'we' seemed to have become worldwide," (p. 3, 1991). In popular culture too, science-fiction films commonly featured cyborg characters in the 1970s, 1980s, and to a lesser extent, the 1990s (Short 2005; Thomas 2015). The cyborg figure was not just a "fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource" (p. 150, Haraway 1999) for use by theorists, but a common story for "understand[ing] and process[ing] new modes of subjectivity" (p. 322, Hayles 1995; also a perspective supported by pg. 45, Short 2005).

This thesis follows Rhys Owain Thomas in the consideration of the cyborg as a now redundant figure. Thomas explores the necessity of the cyborg in the 1970s and following decades as a representation through which to explore negative association of the encroachment of technology on the organic body (2015). He proposes that this negativity arose from the opposition that technology gave to the security of the humanist self with its

fixed boundaries and exceptionalism from both the natural and technological world. Braidotti and Haraway's descriptions of the impact of technology during these decades seem to align with this explanation.

However, in the 21st century scene of habituation to rapid technological change, rise of social media sites, and the consequent changes to "personal subjectivities and interpersonal relationships" "the cyborg becomes redundant as a marker of social, political, and cultural anxieties," (p. 64, Thomas 2015). Specifically, the abatement of a "perceived threat to the notion of coherent personal identities," (p. 64, Thomas 2015) and an embrace of virtual performances of self as an emergent or dominant technology of self represents a shift in the feelings associated with alternative, technological subjectivities.

This thesis contends that the superhero is the figure that has arisen as the new story through which to "understand and process new modes of subjectivity" (p. 322, Hayles 1995) and the potentials for alternative subjectivities that may be enabled by our interactions with networked technology. Hence, whilst the cyborg figure has clear relevance to the theoretical framework of the thesis it does not inform the thesis' approach further than its technological focus in the web relations a subject may form.

Affordance and the selection of case studies

This thesis is guided by the concept of affordances in examining the interplay between selected case studies and contemporary digital relationships. Affordances serve to narrow the focus from digital relationships as a whole to specific elements of the modern digital experience. This focused approach enables a closer examination of elements that resonate with recognisable features of the web. Rather than considering the web as a complex set of interactions, technologies, and human and nonhuman entities, the thesis focuses on particular aspects that are most relevant to the analysis.

Affordances have a complex and contested critical history. Initially, they were defined as the interactions facilitated by the shape or features of an object (Gibson 1966). Over time, sociological inquiry broadened this concept to include social relations that either permit or shape the types of interaction possible (Hutchby 2001). Bruno Latour's actor-network theory

aligns with this idea, assigning agency to nonhuman, nonliving entities in shaping interactions (Latour 1987). However, some proponents of affordance theory still hold that artefacts can "*only* afford what subjects perceive them to afford (e.g., A. Cooper et al., 1995/2014)" (pg. 242, Davis and Chouinard 2016)

Within internet and media studies, Hutchby introduced the term "communicative affordances" to denote the features of webpages and the broader internet system that influence user interaction with web content (Hutchby 2001). Here, content encompasses text, video, images, or any other data online, created by individuals, humans, nonhumans, or collectives, for other users to engage with. These affordances also reciprocally shape the user's interaction, influencing their self-perception and subjectivity (Hutchby 2001; Latour 1987). Thus, users' performances of self vary depending on specific technologies within this framework.

In the context of social media, Bucher (2016), and Nagy and Neff (2015) argue that the power of affordances is partly influenced by the user's perception or belief when engaging with the affordance. For instance, regarding algorithms that determine the frequency and audience reach of content, users will approach content creation differently based on their understanding of how these algorithms function (Bucher, 2016). Nagy and Neff coined the term "imagined affordances" to "better [incorporate] the material, the mediated, and the emotional aspects of human–technology interaction" (p. 2, 2015). As such, this theorisation of the affordance expands to encompass the relationality of a users' relationships with the web, and affordances relationship with the user.

Whilst it is outside of the scope of this thesis to investigate affordances of the web directly, they contribute to the frame of reference for identifying potential representations of the user's digital experience within selected superhero genre texts. Here, I will briefly summarise the affordances most directly engaged with by the selected case studies. These affordances have been identified by scholars in digital and media studies through sociological engagement with users and critical theoretical reflections on web structures.

The first case study of the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) primarily engages with web affordances related to online self-presentation, particularly the image as representation of self or self-branding (Hearn 2008). This includes the ability of the user to create content which is in

itself quite a varied set of affordances according to the specific platforms used. For example, the character limits of different profiles or “bio” spaces variably constrain the user’s ability to verbally represent themselves to other users. Jose van Dijck, a prominent media studies scholar, has examined the affordances of social media sites as encouraging users towards a presentation of a single, coherent and authentic identity (2013). As she explains, social media CEOs, such as Mark Zuckerberg, promote the idea that in order to be authentic, the user must perform a consistent and coherent self. The capital-producing potential of data supplied to advertisers is associated with accuracy of the data. Therefore, for social media sites to ensure that data bears a direct and realistic relationship with the user that partakes in its production, consistency is sought from the user.

The user's ability to represent themselves online has also been critically examined through the lens of self-branding or impression management (e.g., Gilpin 2011; Whitmer 2019; Hearn 2008). In these sociological studies, users report their varying uses of the platform’s features in order to present a desirable and capital-producing profile. Content creation is partly supported by, and supports, another affordance of networked media: visibility. Visibility refers to the ability of content to be seen by other users or “the potential audience who can bear witness” (p. 11, boyd 2014). As Tania Bucher explains, social media algorithms reward content that generates further content and user reactions in the form of emoji buttons indicating “likes” or “love” etc. This affective content is rewarded through the content appearing on more users’ timelines or feeds on the platform in question (Bucher 2012). However, these algorithms are often obscured, prompting users to speculate or imagine what influences the visibility of their content (Nagy and Neff, 2015).

This affordance facilitates a two-way flow of power, similar to the double-bind concept described by Braidotti and Foucault (Braidotti, 2019). Visibility empowers users to present themselves online to a wide audience, both human and nonhuman, defining themselves through their expression. It allows users to influence others through their content, with reaction buttons and comments encouraging further engagement (Bucher, 2012). However, positioning viability as a reward and thereby as a signifier of successful content or performances of self entraps the user into normative forms of self performance (Whitmer 2019). The user must

manage their image or impression to produce the most affective, most desirable content. It is from this that the capital-producing technics of self-branding and online impression management arise (Duffy, Pruchniewska, and Scolere 2017).

The second case study of *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) narratively focuses on surveillance, photographs / images, archives, the power of memory and trauma-based emotional flashbacks. In this, the affordances of persistence and archive are evoked. Persistence is identified as a primary affordance of the web by danah boyd (2014). In her sociological study on teenager's engagement with social media, boyd discusses the serious implications of the persistence of content. For example, because content is designed to persist in digital archives, interactions with such content is able to take place asynchronously. Moreover, persistence also means "that those using social media are often "on the record" to an unprecedented degree" (boyd 2014). It is this aspect that *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) engages with in its play with surveillance and photographic proof.

Whilst archiving is not identified as an affordance within the edited collection *Save As… Digital Memories* (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, and Reading 2009), investigations within this book reflect on the nature of the web's digital archive on autobiographical practices. This thesis sees the digital archive as an extension of the persistence affordance - an archive would not be possible without the persistence of the content that it is constituted by.

However, the digital archive has specific qualities itself. This includes the connectivity or availability of content to others. This can include other human users but it can also include algorithmic others. As Benjamin N. Jacobsen and David Beer have investigated, the algorithmic functions on social media platforms such as Facebook utilise, remix, and appropriate user's past content to provoke continued engagement with the site through the content's associated affects (2021). This aim is not always executed - the surprising presentation to the user of their past content can provoke feelings of discoherency and discomfort. These feelings are reflected in *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) and this thesis examines the text's representation of these ruptures caused by the affordance of algorithmic agency.

Related to this superstructure of nonhuman access of user content is the concept of data harvesting. *Westworld* (2016-2022), the third case study, centres data harvesting through

dialogue and the central contests over control in the narrative. Shoshana Zuboff undertook a significant examination and theoretical reflection on the mechanisms of data harvesting (2019a, 2019b). Zuboff frames data harvesting structures as incursions upon not just the user's data, but the user's self due to the nature of the content as performances of self online. Zuboff's explanation of data will be further discussed in chapter 6.

Finally, and in juxtaposition with the preceding chapter's engagement with affordances associated with identifiable performance of self online, chapter 7's case study of *Watchmen* (2019) engages with issues surrounding anonymity. Anonymity has been of concern to media studies scholars since the early days of online social fora such as Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) (Turkle 1996). For example, Sherry Turkle engaged with the affordance of anonymity enabling the production of a second self (2005). Whilst the distinction that Turkle initially understood to exist between the online and offline world has been rejected as redundant, anonymity does empower an escape from social expectations tied to the body or social position of the user. This, of course, has been seen to result in harmful behaviour that, offline, would have resulted in consequences for the anonymous user. For example, with the rapist reported in *A Rape in Cyberspace* escaping punishment due to their anonymity (Dibbell 1993).

In sum, this thesis approach to close reading is informed by an understanding of the contemporary affordances of the web that the superhero genre may be seen to be engaging with. This allows the thesis to suggest the genre's strategic materialisation or visualisation of relations with digital technology in the replication or figuration of recognisable features from the web.

Finally, the contribution of affordances to the thesis' critical framework intersects with significant insights from critical analysis of the superhero genre. As discussed, affordances can facilitate a paradoxical flow of power; empowering the user whilst trapping them in norms or shapes that the affordance is conducive to (Braidotti [cite]; boyd 2014: Bucher 2016). While the superhero genre was chosen for its commercial success during the relevant time period, this thesis aims to demonstrate its suitability for illustrating the double-bind of power and nomadic potentials facilitated by networked media.

This thesis follows Robert Peaslee in understanding the superhero as an embodiment of an

ideological seam (2007). Peaslee adopts the term from Janice Radway to suggest that the body of the superhero is a site where the “tightly woven fibres of social cohesion and control” can be revealed, troubled and shown to be faulty (p. 39, 2007). The result is an often paradoxical presentation of values or demands on the superhero’s body. Moreover, he superhero’s split identity between super alter ego and civilian identity often embodies competing values, manifested in their costumes (Brownie and Graydon, 2015).

With a focus on networked technology and affordances, the thesis views the superhero body as both a signifier of their “expanded self” and a site for contests of control. The representation of the character of the superhero is understood to potentially explore the ability of affordances to simultaneous empower and entrap the user within dominant discursive formations. The elements contributing to the text’s representation of the superhero character, and their interplay with the primary affordances engaged with in the text are examined for their figuration of power and paradoxical contests for control over the subject.

The subsequent chapters will analyse the chosen case studies in depth, drawing upon the methodological framework established in this section. Through these analyses, I hope to unravel the intricate relationships between superhero narratives, networked neoliberalism, and the conceptualisation of the production of self. The findings presented in this thesis aim to broaden perspectives and encourage further scholarly discussions on the transformative potential of superhero media in shaping our understanding of self in the digital age.

Chapter 4: Iron Man as the representation of the user

The case study chosen for this chapter's examination of the representation of the relationship between self and identity in the 21st century is the Marvel Cinematic Universe's (MCU) *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013), with additional references to the character's appearances in the *Spider-Man* (2017, 2019, 2021) and *Avengers* films (2012-Ongoing) for a rounded view of this character. In 2008, Marvel initiated what would become a multi-phase release of interconnected superhero stories known as "The Infinity Saga", coming to an exhilarating conclusion in the crossover of these character's stories in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The MCU is currently continuing with another three phases of films known as "The Multiverse Saga" (2021-Ongoing).

The Infinity Saga not only showcased the immense popularity of the MCU but also marked a significant milestone in the evolution of superhero storytelling. Instead of primarily focusing on single character's linear or procedural adventures, the MCU phases embrace the networked nature of their rich comic book hyperdiegesis. This change in the approach to superhero storytelling is the first sign that the genre is responding to the rise of networked media as it begins to replicate networks in its televisual media products. The networked nature of superhero comic book stories was already well known by fans and comic book writers. The move to replicating this in televisual media speaks to the priority for visual and electronic aesthetics that the rise of social media introduced or responded to.

Case Study: Iron Man

Iron Man (2008) served as the inaugural film of MCU Phase 1 and marked the beginning of the Infinity Saga, introducing audiences to the "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist" Tony Stark. While the film's production timeline extends back to 2007 and even earlier to 2005 when the rights were acquired, its content and visual strategies are influenced by the same contexts of production that gave rise to the user-centric turn of social media sites. As

such, I*ron Man* (2008) occupies a unique place in the post-2008 superhero media explosion, making it particularly significant in exploring the effects of web affordances on user experiences.

The enduring significance of Iron Man as a character is evident in his continuous presence and evolution throughout the MCU. Unlike *The Incredible Hulk*, which was also released in 2008 but received no sequels, Iron Man received sustained individual focus through its eponymous films over the following 5 years, as well as appearances in ensemble cast and other character's films from 2012 to 2019. The consistent portrayal of Tony Stark/Iron Man by Robert Downey Jr. throughout the vast narrative arcs that bring together multiple superheroes in a climactic final battle against a villain, with Iron Man sacrificing himself to save humanity and his daughter, reinforces the character's centrality to this period of superhero media.

Marvel's persistent focus on Iron Man positions him as a significant self-model within the Marvel universe. Through Iron Man, Marvel suggests, glamorises, and explores a distinct relationship with technology, selfhood, and networked neoliberalism. The continued centrality and popularity of Iron Man suggests that audiences recognised and responded to the model of self that Marvel represents here. The relationship between Tony Stark and the technological suit that he wears to become Iron Man clearly replicates the relationship between the avatar/online self performance and user afforded by the web. As with the user, Tony Stark's authentic identity is dispersed through physical technological objects and virtual spaces, the suit even physically replicates the proliferation of virtual platforms on the web as it is shown to be an assemblage of modular segments.

Furthermore, Iron Man's centrality within the MCU extends even beyond his death. Memorials and documentaries about his heroic sacrifice and legacy are featured in subsequent films like *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), showcasing the enduring impact of his character and the continued exploration of his influence on the evolving relationship between users and technology. Spider-Man appears to be taking the mantle for the representation of this relationship in the most recent films, with *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019) exploring the potentials of alternate reality technologies and deep fake videos, and

Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021) looking at the risks of multiple performances of self and the freedom from accountability afforded by anonymity.

Building upon the legacy of the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013), these *Spider-Man* films (2019, 2021) bring the exploration of the relationship between identity and technology up to date. Where Iron Man only focuses on the relationship through Tony Stark's relationship with the Iron Man suit as an avatar representing a fuller or truer identity, the *Spider-Man* films (2019, 2021) explore more recent technological developments such as drones, holographic projections, and deep fake video manipulation techniques.

"I am Iron Man": The collapse of disciplinary public and private arenas as represented in *Iron Man* (2008)

Iron Man (2008) introduces the character of Tony Stark as he suffers a physical trauma that leads him to become the superhero Iron Man. The film follows Stark as he is wounded by a bomb made by his own company, Stark Industries, that he inherited from his father but has had little involvement with. Instead, a fatherly figure and friend of the family Obadiah Stane has been leading the company in Stark's place. Following his injury, Stark is held hostage by the Ten Rings, a terrorist organisation, and he awakes to find he is trapped in a network of caves where he meets Dr Yinsen, another captive. Dr Yinsen aids Stark in constructing armour and a miniature arc reactor, a clean energy generator initially designed by Stark's father, to allow their escape. However, Yinsen dies in the attempt. Stark returns to the US with a determination to avenge Yinsen's death. He does so by refining the suit into a weapon but also closes the arms branch of his company. This decision is prompted by Stark's discovery of illicit arms deals between his company and the terrorists, later revealed to have been the work of Stane himself. The climax of the film sees Stark and Stane fight each other above the arc reactor which provides clean power to Stark Industries.

While the final scene of the film holds significance for fans, it departs from the typical tropes of the superhero genre by rejecting the necessity of a secret identity for superheroes. Normally, a superhero maintains a secret civilian identity to protect themselves or their loved ones from supervillains or the interference of governing powers. Stark defies the government

to publicly assume the identity of Iron Man, the name attributed to the suit by the press. The identity claim, “I am Iron Man”, that strikingly ends the film is a culmination of Stark’s development of a new identity. It is also a significant reason to look at this film and character as the collapse of the superhero/civilian split replicates a similar collapse of public and private spheres, online and offline identities that was beginning to emerge at the time of the film’s release.

Iron Man as a Representation of the Mediatised Self: Media’s threat to selfhood

Iron Man (2008) establishes Tony Stark as a character whose identity is shaped by media representations and corporate images. The first two sequences of the film, the first where Stark is wounded in Afghanistan and the second where Stane collects an award on Stark’s behalf, establish Stark as a character who is defined by public perception of him.

The film opens with an establishing shot of two military vehicles driving through barren desert, with overlaid text marking this as “Kunar Province. Afghanistan.” This immediately evokes the US-Afghanistan war, or the War on Terror. The shot is accompanied by what appears to be non-diegetic music, AC/DC’s Back in Black. However, this is quickly revealed to diegetic music issuing from a stereo within one of the cars. A middle-aged male soldier looks at the stereo disconcertedly and then towards someone in the back seats.

Through interactions with soldiers, it becomes clear that Stark is connected with wealth and power, as evidenced by the luxury items and relaxed demeanour he displays. The first shot of Stark is of his hand holding a glass of alcohol with ice clinking. Behind the hand sits a younger male soldier, in the left-hand side passenger seat, who pulls a concerned face as he looks towards Stark.

Stark’s first lines are to make jokes about his situation and the seriousness of the soldiers, reinforcing the trivial approach he takes to the serious situation. His superficial personality in this scene belies the emptiness of the corporate image that has so far been constructed for him, as shall be revealed in the following scene.

The audience is invited to inhabit Stark’s position. The shots given of the interior of the car are from near to Stark’s perspective. The audience is also not shown the driver of the car

until she speaks to which Stark remarks with surprise “Good god, you’re a woman”. Whilst not as obvious here, Stark’s identity is subtly disregarded as the audience is allowed to take his place. Whatever understanding of the self that we may come to this film with, as a bounded and unitary metaphysical thing, is disrupted by the homospatiality of the audience/camera and Stark body, taken as the vehicle of self.

Stark continues that “I would apologise but isn’t that what we’re going for here,” referring to movements for gender equality, “I thought of you as a soldier first.” The soldiers maintain serious expressions through this remark but show no signs of disagreement. Whilst it may be an appropriate cultural remark, it also shows that Stark is predisposed to regard group affiliations, such as belonging to the army, first, over personal identities. Moreover, he pays attention to uniform or visual representation of the self through clothing, over the physicality of the body which has cultural meaning, i.e. the sexual characteristics of the female soldier’s body that are read as womanhood. Stark goes on to comment on her “bone structure” and that “I’m actually having a hard time not looking at you now”, these comments are met with jovial laughter, the first break in the soldier’s serious demeanour.

Finally, the link between Stark's identity and his public image is consolidated in the younger soldier’s request for a photograph with him. This clearly suggests an engagement with celebrity culture. The photograph fulfils its role as proving the real and providing evidence of identity, specifically the visual appearance of the soldier and Stark is proving their personhood, that they’re alive and experiencing this moment. Stark happily agrees and begins to pose with the soldier. Stark thus enthusiastically engages with the persona of a celebrity.

However, this is troubled by the older soldier struggling to use the camera and then, at the precise movement that the photograph is to be taken and the camera’s shutter close, the car ahead is blown up. The interruption of the photograph by the explosion and subsequent chaos in the war zone serves to trouble Stark's superficial persona. It juxtaposes his signifiers of wealth and celebrity with the harsh reality of the war, revealing his lack of real-world experience and empathy for the soldiers' situation.

Furthermore, the violent eruption at the time of the photograph suggests that the way in

which Stark is currently understood as a media personality is harmful. This is immediately reinforced by the image of the Stark Industries branded bomb blowing up, with an extended amount of time being spent zooming in on the name to draw attention to it, and almost killing Stark. The camera slowly pulls out to an overhead shot of Stark lying noticing blood on his shirt and slowly ripping it open to display the bullet-proof vest he was wearing has been blasted through over his heart. The pathos in this moment is strong, heavy music and a slowness of camera shot that contrasts the quick and chaotic sounds and visuals of fire, shrapnel and gunfire that accompanies the scene. Stark's corporate identity in this moment is represented as a physical attack on his life. With the heart standing for the emotions of a person, the damage to the heart suggests emotional damage from the disciplinary violence enacted against the essence of self that Stark has.

This opening sequence ends with Stark being filmed by terrorists as part of a hostage video. Stark then does get his celebrity visual memento but of a darker kind, reinforcing the threat media holds towards Star's selfhood. Here, much like the earlier signifiers of wealth, Stark's identity is reduced to the potential he holds to produce financial capital. Shots from the perspective of the video camera, demonstrated through an overlay including battery power and time, reinforces the earlier photograph's connection to the reduction of identity to its capital value; visual media technologies have a flattening effect on the dimensions of self performances as signifiers of different parts of identity are separated from their contexts. This shot is followed by the title card of *Iron Man* in large golden letters on a black background. Whilst this suggests the later golden shine of the revamped Iron Man suit, it reinforces the connection between Stark, capital, and commercial affiliations.

The threat media presents to Stark's selfhood is reinforced at other points through the film, including a sequence following a press conference upon his return to the US where shots from Stark's perspective exiting the building are blurred and shoppy, with minor cuts giving the impression that Stark has difficulty following what is happening around him. These cinematographic strategies suggests that Stark is experiencing a depersonalisation from the events taking place. This could be argued to be representative of the trauma of his experiences in Afghanistan. However, due to the heavy media presence in this scene,

including paparazzi and fans requesting autographs, the scene emphasises the harm media has caused to Stark.

Building upon the portrayal of media and collective identities being damaging to selfhood, the film establishes the disciplinary nature of media over Stark as malicious and ultimately as preventing the formation of any selfhood. The images of Stark in this case define a person, they indicate Stark but not as a “doer” of self acts as his media image is produced by others. This is most obviously highlighted in the awards scene that immediately follows the opening sequence in Afghanistan.

The awards scene introduces Stark through a montage of images of magazine covers with voice over narration explaining the development of Stark’s life so far in terms of awards, family tragedies, and the success of his inherited business. The magazine covers show Stark in various corporate suits, alongside images of his father, business logo, and Obidiah Stane, Stark Industries board member and a family friend. Stark is finally invited up on stage to collect his award from a good friend, Rhodey, who looks disappointed as Stark’s chair is lit up with a spotlight- revealing his absence.

The juxtaposition of Stark’s absence from the table and the highlighting of his empty chair with a spotlight suggests two things. Firstly, it suggests the lack of self that Stark has been able to produce. His identity has been defined for him by the disciplinary power of commercial business and the press. The highlighting of images that reference Stark’s inheritance of a legacy from his father also suggests the power that the father or family has on shaping individual’s selves.

The lack of an origin of these images of self as represented in Stark’s physical absence from the scene resonates with Braidotti’s use of Butler and Deleuze in suggesting that the self has no origin, no essential and exceptional presence in the human’s mind or body (p. 5, Braidotti 1994). Instead, Stark is conjured from these images that indicate the external production of selfhood through other entities. The press, company, and family legacy co-produce Stark’s public identity whilst Stark himself is abjected from the process.

Secondly, the prioritisation of images of Stark encapsulates some processes of self-

branding. As Hearn discusses, self-branding requires the production of desirable self images, both in a visual sense and in the sense of the impression others make of you through everything associated with your performance of self (Hearn 2008). Hearn ascribes the rise of self-branding to the postmodernist placement of image as a commodity. Images of self become “commodity signs”, representations of self that are alienable, promotional, and can be sold (p. 16, Wernick 1991). Here, the representation of Stark through images of magazines and newspapers highlights the circulation of these self images as commodity signs. Moreover, the images are horizontally scrolled through, suggesting the movement of these images as they are circulated and sold on for capital.

Through the simultaneous representation of external powers’ involvement in the production of self images and the alienation of self images as commodity signs, *Iron Man* (2008) suggests that Stark’s position as a “site for the extraction of value” is primarily for the benefit of institutional forces such as commercial companies. Moreover, these simultaneous representations suggest that the disciplinary power held by society, in the shaping and interpellation of the subject within a capitalist society, enables the flow of capital for the sakes of accumulation for institutions.

The affordances of the web that enable the user’s self performance online are similarly geared towards the production of capital for large organisations. For example, data collection on the user’s content production and responses can be packaged into data sets for targeted advertising (Zuboff 2019a, 2019b). It is this capital production that underlies the ability of search engines, such as Google, and social networking sites to make a profit without charging their users (Davis 2006). The users’ ability to perform themselves online then is simultaneously an empowerment for self-definition and self-entrepreneurship, and an entrapment of the subject into positioning itself as site for the extraction of value (Flisfeder 2015; Braidotti 2018).

Iron Man (2008) embodies this accumulation and disciplinary focus in Obidiah Stane, the primary antagonist of this film though his involvement isn’t revealed until later. Stane is the de facto leader of Stark Industries at the time due to Tony Stark’s lack of involvement with or interest in the company. Stane is displayed glancing at the empty chair with a slightly saddened

expression and shortly after, rises from his seat to take the award on behalf of Stark. With the understanding that Stane is the primary antagonist for his own financial benefit, the declaration he makes as he receives the award on Tony's behalf, "If I were Tony", belies his intentional sabotage of Stark's formation of selfhood through the production of his public image and withholding of the control over Stark Industries.

Overall, in these first scenes, a complex relationship between Stark and identity is set up. Collective identities and visual signifiers are prioritised over individuals. Indicators of wealth and celebrity reduce the meaning of individual's self performances to the value of capital that they hold or hold the potential for. Corporate and familial identities are considered threats to the individual, restricting self performance and authenticity. The damaging effects of visual media are here attributed specifically to non-networked forms of media and, particularly, public images produced as part of celebrity culture. The choice of Robert Downey Jr. to portray Stark is a significant one as he is known for having gone through a similar difficult and harmful journey with his own family and the pressure of celebrity images.

Escaping the disciplinary gaze: Stark and the Suit

It is necessary for the film to establish the harmful effects of disciplinary power over public image to portray the shift towards an understanding of individual's being able to claim agency over self-production. However, the film quickly moves on to showcase this agential self-production. The suit is presented as armour, providing protection not only against physical violence but also against the harmful disciplinary use of Stark's image. It becomes a physical barrier between Stark's face and the world. Stark's relationship with the suit metaphorically mirrors the user's relationship with self performances online, blurring the boundaries between user and avatar.

Iron Man's suit represents two things: the human relationship with technology and the user's relationship with online identities. It embodies the collision of these elements because without material technology, the user would be unable to perform their online identities. The suit, Iron Man as a superhero, and even Stark himself are all assemblages, highlighting the idea that Stark is an assemblage even before his interactions with technology, as we are

already presented with his image without his physicality prior to the invention of the suit. In a literal sense, the suit is assembled from various parts. The territorial lines cutting across Stark's body discipline and structure the appearance of the suit into the recognisable shape of the male form, representing strength (Deleuze and Guattari 1996). However, this disciplinary aspect brings a sense of distrust or weakness when considering the suit as a fully liberating entity, separate from disciplinary subjecthood.

The suit is a product of Stark's experience, creative genius, hard work, study, and drive for perfection. The repeated moments of improving the suit and fixing the heart device with Pepper Potts, his personal assistant and later love interest, underscore a constant drive for enhancement—an extension of Tony himself. The suit is powered by the miniature arc reactor that protects Stark’s heart. With this connection, the suit protects Stark’s physical image from being misused and misrepresented, but the identity of Iron Man also protects his selfhood from harmful practices. The suit, like any product, represents his labour, but it also represents him through the actions he performs while wearing it, showcasing his values, and transformed perspective, as he utilises his weapons not for warfare but for rescue.

The process of producing the suit involves a montage sequence of Stark and Dr Yinsen examining designs and engaging in physical labour. Close-up shots emphasise Stark's sweat and muscles, highlighting the labour-intensive nature of self-work required in online self performances. The film continually highlights the backstage work involved, including another montage of home video footage as Stark adjusts the suits, enabling them to fly and conform to his body shape.

The initial version of the suit is constructed with blocks and thick sheets of metal, making it cumbersome. However, subsequent versions become sleeker, with hints of the male form in their shape, featuring a flat broad chest and markings across the face panel resembling eyes and a mouth. The evolution of the suit throughout this film and the franchise parallels the development of networked technology, transitioning from practical devices to fashionable ones, offering a plethora of designs to cater to individual consumers.

The masculine style of the suit personalises it, transforming it from a mere tool into an expression of individual identity and values. The shine and metallic aesthetics of the suit

serve as a reminder of its materiality as hardware, while its masculine shapes remind us of the human form it represents. The sequences of improvement also feature Stark's named and responsive AI systems, imbuing the robots with personality. Through these scenes, the audience understands that the suit is more than a tool—it is an extension of Stark's intelligence inhabiting the metal frame of the robot, emphasising its significance.

The development of the suit in a foreign land and isolated network of caves reinforces Stark's escape from disciplinary control and marks his initial claim to agency outside the constructed persona imposed upon him. Consequently, the refinement of the suit represents an authentic expression of Stark's true self. The contrast between the wild landscape and isolated caves, juxtaposed with Stark's return to the bright and bustling USA, symbolises two separate social arenas: the virtual wilderness where self-expression can be explored and experimented with, and the tangible material world, where societal expectations constrain the expression of self.

“I am Iron Man”: The agential production of the posthuman self

Stark’s self is dispersed across the assemblage that he creates; the modular suit, the AI assistant JARVIS, his physical body, and mind. The dispersion of Stark throughout the Iron Man assemblage has raised concerns among critics like Neal Curtis, who perceives the use of JARVIS as a sacrifice of Stark’s higher cognitive functions (2013a). JARVIS’ helpful nature and automatic targeting system are reminiscent of networked technologies capabilities. As such, I interpret this dispersion differently; as an embodiment of the spreading self across web content, a phenomenon emerging during this period. The suit can be likened to the concept of an avatar, and later *Spider-Man*: *Homecoming* (2017) uses empty versions of the suit for communication between Stark and Parker, eliminating the need for physical interaction. The suit exists at a distance from its creator, lacking a physical boundary, yet Stark declares, "the suit is me" and "I am Iron Man." suggesting that the physical distance has no bearing on his expression or location of self.

The physical separation between the suit and Stark suggests a parallel with the distance between self performances and the performer. Performances simultaneously represent the self that enacted them while also remaining separate, detached, and capable of being

removed, just as images of Stark as a corporate man or playboy can be detached and circulated through magazine covers.

The visible arc reactor heart is the only part of Stark seen when he is inside the suit. In Western culture, the heart carries connotations of personality and emotions. This implies that Stark is most vulnerable in this form, as he becomes truest to himself, with his emotions laid bare on the surface. The film reinforces this interpretation through Pepper Potts' gift of Stark's old arc reactor, even after it becomes unnecessary. Although he initially tells her to discard it, she returns it to him with a sign reading "Proof that Tony Stark has a heart." This highlights Tony's lack of emotional depth up until this point.

Initially, the suit serves as armour and then becomes representative of Stark due to their physical coexistence. This homospatiality, where multiple identities occupy the same physical space, is a characteristic of superheroes. To external observers, despite any gap or boundary between Stark's physical body and the metal suit, the two identities occupy the same space. However, the audience is not granted the same homospatiality. While we observe Stark from outside the suit through shots of it in the air or on military control room screens, we are also shown Stark's face within the headpiece of the suit, obscured by the visual heads-up display he uses to monitor its condition.

The suit is powered by the arc reactor that safeguards Stark's heart, a component intertwined with his familial legacy that he has improved upon, establishing a separation between himself and the corporate control over his identity. The suit serves as armour not only against physical attacks but also against the psychological exertion of disciplinary power over his identity through the capture of his physical image.

The final scene of the film cements its depiction of the progression from a separation of user/avatar to a collapse of private/public and real/online distinctions, acknowledging the affordances of the internet in shaping identity. The scene begins with a long shot of a TV screen on a news channel showing Colonel Rhodes at a podium giving a press release. The camera backs out to show a newspaper, with the headline “Who is the Iron Man?”, then revealed to be read by Stark as Pepper Potts, his personal assistant and love interest, does his makeup. Phil Coulson of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and

Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.) enters the room to provide Stark with his cover story speech prompts. After he leaves, Stark discusses with Potts the possibility that he admits he's Iron Man, which Potts quickly dismisses. Stark is then invited up to the podium by Rhodes to give his own speech. He starts to go off script almost immediately after a question by a reporter on the true identity of Iron Man. Stark comments on how out of character it would be for him to be a "superhero", a word the reporter points out she didn't use. Rhodes whispers to Stark to stay on script, which Stark ignores and announces that "the truth is... I am Iron Man" (*Iron Man,* 2008).

This revelation is intended to shock the audience as it breaks the superhero genre's convention of hidden identities and speaks to the shifting perception of identity in the era of social media networks. The public/private and online/offline distinction is broken in this simple phrase as the separation of self performances collapses. Stark's exercise of agency in the declaration and reclamation of identity align with the power of citizen journalists against institutional prescription of permissible self performances and even public perception (Allan and Thorsen 2009). As he states himself, it is entirely out of character for the playboy billionaire to care enough to protect the US and civilians personally. In this, the position of the superhero as ideological seam, a representative of a clash between the hegemonic ideology and alternatives, begins (Peaslee, 2007).

This scene reinforces Stark's position as a mediated public identity, emphasising his portrayal through news media both onscreen and off. Contrasting with the onscreen news reporting, the print newspaper suggests a separate identity in its change of medium, its less flashy and colourful style at odds with the appearances of television screens and magazine covers. This contrast of media reflects Stark's move away from the commercialised visual identity that he has been moulded to up until the Ten Rings kidnap. Taking the new visual identity and name that the press has developed, Stark expresses values that do not cohere with his commercial and corporate identity. However, the agency performed in this claim of identity is also troubled in Stark's appropriation of the press' naming of the suit; it appears that Stark is still responding to public perception of his self although this time, he is in control of how much that image defines him.

The final "I am Iron Man" statement transitions to the end credits which dismantles the Iron Man suit into its constituent parts. The freeze frame at the end overlays Stark's face with a computer-generated image of the mask which underscores the inseparable connection between Stark and the Iron Man persona. The camera then delves inside the mask, revealing its inner workings before retracting. The suit begins to disassemble, and the credits list the constituent parts involved in the film's creation. This serves as a metaphorical reflection of the collaborative effort involved in creating the film itself, proposing that the film and its many producers are as much part of the assemblage of the Iron Man identity as the contents of the film.

Overall, the first *Iron Man* (2008) film establishes the Iron Man assemblage as an embodiment, across multiple objects and entities, of the user's relationship with self production that uses or is dispersed over networked technology and virtual spaces. The film's portrayal of Stark's development of this version of dispersed selfhood relies upon the movement from disciplinary, top-down media to the user-centric affordances of the web that allow for the user's agential claims to self performances normally considered beyond the permissible forms of self-expression expected by their society. However, the film also throws doubt on the possibility of total escape from the disciplinary gaze as self performances still require ratification by other human selves to be accepted as an authentic representation of the performer.

"I am Iron Man; the suit and I are one.": *Iron Man 2* (2010)

Iron Man 2 (2010) delves deeper into the struggle for control over Stark's identity. The film opens with Stark's press release speech from the first movie, stopping at the word "superhero" as it appears on an old television in Moscow. As the antagonist creates his own suit, newspaper and magazine covers showcase Stark's publicised image, incorporating the Iron Man symbol alongside his corporate identity. The presentation of these clippings mirrors the awards scene in the film. Just as Stark was physically absent in the awards scene, both Stark and the iconic "I am Iron Man" statement are missing from this sequence. This relocation of the phrase emphasises Tony's growing identification with the suit and its representation of success and security.

The rest of the film revolves around Stark's efforts to retain ownership of the suit, while facing threats from the son of the original arc reactor designer. Simultaneously, Stark is also grappling with palladium poisoning, a consequence of the arc reactor, and eventually discovers a new element to replace it, a hidden formula left by his father.

The pivotal "I am Iron Man" statement occurs during the committee hearing, following Stark's speech with the bikini-clad dancers. This scene employs multiple framing techniques, blending film, news reports, and courtroom scenes to create a layered and mediated exposition. Stark employs videos to defend himself and challenge the arguments for the government's control over the suit. This nesting of different media forms underscores the free flow of information and diverse media forms in the online virtual space, highlighting the power of citizen journalists and the subversion of institutional narratives.

As Stark declares, "I am Iron Man, the suit and I are one," this assertion rejects the notion of the suit being commandeered, reducing Stark to servitude or prostitution. The suit has become an integral part of Stark's identity, evident in its incorporation into his public persona. The multi-mediated scene accentuates this shift by focusing on dynamic reporting rather than static images, echoing the transformation of Stark's life from that seen in the magazines of the first film. However, despite this amalgamation, the suit primarily functions as armour and a weapon, a "hi-tech prosthesis."

The discussions surrounding Stark's ownership of the suit and the symbolic aspects of his identity underscore his reluctance to see the suit alienated from him, resembling the process of products being separated from their creators for commercial gain (Cubitt 2013). This parallels the commodification of identity in online social networking sites, where personal brands are built on visual identities, Instagram posts, and self-expression for capital generation (Hearn 2008: Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). The branded nature of the suit is reinforced by the preceding scene where Stark drunkenly launches an exposition surrounded by the "Ironettes" - dancing women in Iron Man-inspired bikinis with illuminated chests and hands. The aesthetics of the suit have transcended their original purpose and become part of promotional materials. This reinforces the impression from the circulation of press images seen in the opening scenes of the first film. The Iron Man image has been appropriated into

promotional language and softened from a claim to agency and independence into the common circulation of commodity signs for the extraction of capital (Hearn 2008).

However, Stark's insistence that he and the suit are one challenges this alienation and represents a reversal of the alienation process. Visual markers of identity, such as the suit, are reconstituted within the broader networked self that defines Stark's identity. Thus, the film explores an alternative to the neoliberal paradigm of image-obsessed identity expression, offering a pathway of reconstitution through identification with nonhuman others. The intentional use of the Iron Man aesthetics to promote the exposition could then be seen as a reliance not on image itself to represent the self but aesthetics as being able to be remixed to produce whatever self the performer desires. The remixing of media was not a new practice but the free access of information, public sharing of remixed media and ability to combine different media types with ease was enabled by web technologies and so became a consistent feature. This is seen in the smallest instance of emojis or memes that take inspiration and footage from other media to represent the emotional response of the user.

From dispersal to the fragmentation of self: *Iron Man 3* (2013)

Iron Man 3 (2013) serves as a lens through which we can explore the anxieties provoked by the imperative to be visible and produce a self that garners public attention in the digital age. Tania Bucher's insightful work on the new form of panopticon, where engaging content is rewarded with increased visibility and thereby, an imperative to be visible is formed, provides a framework for understanding the demands placed on individuals in the networked neoliberal landscape (Bucher, 2012). In this analysis, I will examine key scenes from *Iron Man 3* (2013) to demonstrate how the film portrays and interrogates the pressures of online visibility and self-production.

One of the first scenes of this film opens with a domestic scene that serves as a crucial portrayal of Tony Stark's distress and the pressure he faces to perform a particular version of himself in his personal life. Pepper Potts returns to her and Stark’s new home, a large villa on the coast. The living room she enters is a massive space, the emptiness of most of it emphasised by the space between furniture and the height of the ceiling. The room is dimly

lit despite the cold glow of the setting sun through windows at the top of the room. This and the striking metallic suit, exhibiting lighter colours than earlier versions of the Iron Man suit, awaiting her on the couch brings a sense of unease or coldness that Pott's bright and energetic voice breaks through as she questions why Stark is wearing the suit in the house.

Potts questions if this is the 10th or so version of the suit; a close up is shown of the suit's arm as the head of the suit turns to look at it, revealing it to be Mark 42. Not only is Stark producing an unusual amount of suits, but he is also attempting to hide it from his loved one. Stark's metallic voice issues form the suit with his usual civility but with less earnestness than usual. The metallic distortion seems to cut out some of this emotion and reinforces the cold emptiness of the living space. It is quickly revealed, as Potts gets suspicious and comes down to the lab to confront Stark, that he is in fact not in the suit at all.

The coldness of the domestic space is juxtaposed with the well-lit and crowded, messy space of the lab. Stark's production of the suits has become obsessive, fuelled by a desire to protect himself and others. Stark's physical absence depicted in this scene echoes similar instances in the previous *Iron Man* films (2008, 2010), where montages of his media image emphasised his recurring detachment. This absence serves as a visual representation of the anxiety he continues to suffer from the expectation to maintain an appropriate public image regardless of his personal emotional state.

Stark's anxious proliferation of suits suggest that the affect arising from the imperative to maintain a visible image is that of anxiety. There is a pressure to maintain production of self performances to inspire continued engagement and visibility. Without consistent content production, user's profiles are punished with decreased visibility and thereby decreased opportunities for others to interact with their content and decreased opportunities to produce social or financial capital from this content (Bucher 2012).

The most potent embodiment of this anxiety comes in a scene where Potts and Stark are in bed. Stark is having a nightmare which alerts the suit, through a wristband tracking Stark's physiological symptoms, to come to his defence. As the suit is not privy to Stark's experience of dreaming, it identifies Potts as the threat and Stark wakes up just in time to stop it from killing her.

This sequence embodies the affective aspect of the internet. As Jodi Dean explains, the internet can be seen as an affective network as the affecting nature of the web's content motivates users to move across hyperlinks and nodes (2010). Here, Stark's affect as the user of networked technology motivates action in the nonhuman objects that co-construct the Iron Man assemblage. This suggests that affect maintains its own agency within networks. Affective is able to move and provoke action without the user's intent. This also suggests the users experience of algorithms which appear to act and respond to the user's patterns of movement, despite regularly clashing with the user's present emotional state (Jacobsen and Beer 2021a; Beer 2017).

This sequence suggests that Stark has gone too far in his dispersal of self across networked objects. Rather than being dispersed, Stark is fragmented with some aspects of self such as emotion and anxiety, failing to communicate with reason. This is repeated in the climactic final battle as Stark almost fails to save Potts from his own suit as it again targets her as she shares the enemy's biological signature. Shots of Stark's earpiece on the floor are shown as he attempts to contact JARVIS to call off the suit. Here, it is a failure of Stark's dispersed reasoning and physicality as the suit acts with the strategic logic that fuels Stark's success in battle but fails to recognise the difference between enemy and victim. The fragmentation of Stark continues through the film despite attempts to reconsolidate Stark into a unitary self.

The proliferation of suits in this film embodies the need to produce varied content for the production of the self as a product for the generation of capital. However, the aesthetics of the suits also speak to the developments in technology to this point. The physicality of the suits is varied with some taking on more feminine attributes and sleek curves and others taking on larger, blockier shapes suggesting the exaggeration of bodybuilder type bodies. This is a repetition of the suit with differences. The suits continue to produce the Iron Man image but to do so increasingly diverging forms, suggesting an expansion of the dispersal of Stark's self not just in the number of objects through which it is dispersed but the form of the self that it is producing.

The anxiety which produces this expansion is a need to protect not just himself, but the people of the world. This suggests a heightened and overwhelming sense of empathy in the

networked connections that Stark, and indeed we, have to others around the globe through networked communication. The global village is full of suffering that needs to be prevented - displayed through Stark's search through holographic news and citizen reporting from around the world in his earlier investigations.

This heightened connectedness questions where the self stops. If the self is not a bounded, unitary entity but dispersed through many systems, where does this dispersal cease to be the individual that collaboratively performs self with these other systems? Moreover, the freedom that Tony Stark has to define himself outside of a publicly defined image leads to a decentring of his self-identity. This freedom allows him to explore and take on different forms as shown in the range of suits, just as users are able to customise their online avatars and profiles. But if this is the case then the physical body no longer bears any importance to the self it is supposedly a vehicle for. *Iron Man 3* (2013) suggests that there is no end, Stark continues to produce suits until he finally destroys them at the end of the final battle in a fireworks style celebration of a return of himself to Potts and unitary form of self.

The final scene of the film has Stark undergo surgery to remove the shrapnel from his heart, with voice over narration indicating that this was an option from the start. Stark is then shown throwing the arc reactor into the ocean and driving away in the warm sunset glow. In removing this technology from his biological body, Stark ceases to be a literal cyborg. Moreover, the rejection of the arc reactor is a symbol of the rejection of the figurative cyborg state (Haraway 1999; Hayles 1996). Stark acts to reinforce physical and conceptual boundaries between his self and body, and other categories of existence such as technology.

This abjection of technology from the biological body returns Stark to a humanist conceptualisation of human exceptionalism. This also resonates with ideas of the Californian and Silicon Valley ideology that idealises the singular, male genius and his ability to produce technological enhancements (Cameron and Barbrook 1996). Stark is still the genius that produces futuristic technology but he is once again master of his physical state and does not have to rely on technology to keep him alive. The swelling emotional music encourages a positive understanding of Stark's rejection of the opportunities for a dispersed, posthuman self offered by networked technology and his return to a unified self.

However, even within this scene, the supposed return to the unified self is undermined. Stark's voice over narration here and that the beginning of the first is the first use of it through the eponymous films. The disembodiment of Stark's voice juxtaposes with the final shot of his face as he explains that you can take away the suit and the other systems over which he was dispersed, "One thing you can't take away, I am Iron Man", suggests that Stark's dispersal continues. Rather than being dispersed across objects within the film however, he is now dispersed across the formal elements of the film.

The mid-credits scene reinforces the challenge that this voice over presents to the idea of unified self. It is revealed that the narration was in fact to Bruce Banner as Stark lies on a couch commonly seen in representation of therapy in US media. Banner has fallen asleep through Stark's narration of the events of the film and so fails to validate the re-narrativisation and consolidation of Stark in this scene. Stark is angry and refuses to engage in Banner's requests to retell his story. Stark's attempt to solidify the coherence of his newfound, unitary self fails.

An alternative reading of this challenge to the unitary self is one that would suggest that the dispersal of the posthuman self across networks has no reliance on physical objects. Networked media would have been becoming naturalised by 2013, unlike the time of the initial film where iPhones were still new. As Bucher suggests, our relationship with networked media becomes something that is impossible to disconnect from (2020). The pervasion of networked technology though our lives as objects of work, home and social life, the naturalisation of this media means that the expectation to perform self online becomes merely the expectation to perform self as the online is always already present and awaiting performances to capture. Therefore, the doubt placed on Stark's return to a unitary self pushes us to understand Stark's transformation as one to a dispersed self across an always already networked physical-virtual space, where the formal elements of the film represent the overlay of networked media on the physical spaces of our lives, here the visual content of the screen.

Thus, the anxiety felt over self production within the film could be alternatively understood as produced by a disjunction between the digital savvy user and the rest of society as it catches

up with web-based affordances and imperatives. This alternative reading is supported by placement of Stark's identity development in both the first and third films in areas of isolation from urban society, Afghanistan's deserts, and a rural village in the US. These sites of disconnection provide Stark with the backstage to develop his production of self for the public. The wilderness can be read as the online, virtual spaces that hold nothing material but provide the freedom from societal pressure to fully explore the extremes of self-representation. By the end of the film, Rhodey and Potts' understanding of Stark, and his understanding of them, has equalised. They can now sympathetically respond to one another and communicate clearly. Again, as with the reward of visibility for engaging content, the focus is on the acceptance of self performance and communication by others.

Overall, *Iron Man 3* (2013) portrays the anxiety arising from the pressure to perform self online and have this performance engaged with by others. This inspires a proliferation of self performances, with different forms and aesthetics taken to determine both the authenticity of self as viewed by the performer and by the audience who responds to the performance. Stark is shown attempting to return to a unitary sense of self, but the idea of his dispersal remains, something that is later reinforced through the following films as he continues to wear a symbol of the arc reactor despite its removal from his chest.

The implications this has for our understanding of the affordances of the web. Affordances empower the user to perform self however they choose. However, this is accompanied by an anxiety over the reception and visibility of those performances (Bucher 2016: Nagy and Neff 2015). Moreover, our familiarity with networked devices evolves such that the dispersal of self across different objects and platforms is no longer considered a conscious act but becomes part of our habituated self technologies. The internet is no longer a novel space for self production and exploration, but another of many social arenas where self must be appropriately performed, in this instance to inspire interaction and maintain visibility.

Overall themes of Iron Man

The themes that emerge over the three films demonstrate the evolution of the onscreen representation of the production of self in the online world. Firstly, Tony Stark's verbal identity

claims track his trajectory from a self in a world that still recognises a distinction between offline and online, to an identification of the self with all self performances be they on or offline, to an understanding of self as ultimately dispersed through systems. Stark represents the user, whilst the suit demonstrates his evolving relationship with online self performances.

In the first film, the identity claim “I am Iron Man” collapses the trope of superheroes’ secret identities, indicating a claim to denied self performances that is afforded by networked media that removes self performances from the performers body. The anonymity afforded by the web allows for the exploration and play of alternate identities, away from cultural expectations tied to the embodied user. It should be acknowledged though that cultural expectations do circulate online in other users' responses to the content they encounter.

The second film uses the identity claim differently, to explore the contest of control that Stark has with the US military over the ownership of his suit. The collapse is maintained but this time not just as a strategy for agential reclaiming of the right to fashion identity and represent the whole self, but as an evasion of disciplinary control to the point of governing bodies. In the court scene that occurs near the beginning of the film where a hearing is held to determine the ownership of the Iron Man suit as a weapon, Amongst the shutter sounds of the paparazzi and the overlay of news camera footage, Stark calmly outlines, in a level tone “I am Iron Man. The suit and I are one. To turn over the Iron Man suit would be to turnover myself which is tantamount to indentured servitude or prostitution depending on what state you’re in,” (*Iron Man 2,* 2010). The public viewing the action in the court erupts into laughter at this line, covering over the continual sound of shutters from the paparazzi behind Tony Stark. This interruption and the jump cuts around Stark changing between news footage overlay and the clear shots of the film’s cameras, emphasise the break in Stark’s media image. He is no longer defined by the expectations of others. His new image becomes his “shield” with the Iron Man suit literally protecting his image from being captured in its role as material armour.

Where the focus was on corporate control in the previous film, this is the focus on identity as property. The suit is coveted by governing powers but Stark’s posthuman identification with the suit denies the opportunity for disciplinary power to define the limits of allowable self

performance by removing the suit. This portrayal raises the question, where do you draw the line between the producer and the product when the product is the self?

If the online avatar, or any self performance held in online spaces, are considered parts of the self as the psychical work of self is being performed in both mental and online virtual spaces, then the use of this content is “tantamount to indentured servitude” - the self is alienable due to its inhabiting of online spaces. As shall be explored in chapter 6, the alienation of self in the form of a product, here represented by the Iron Man suit, also applies to the harvesting of data about user activity.

In *Iron Man 3* (2013), the identity claim is supposed to bring closure to the film’s narrative, following Stark through an anxious proliferation of suits, representing self performances through their varied shapes, back to the unitary self that rejects the dispersal of self through external objects and systems. The identity claim comes at the end of a montage of shots showing Stark’s surgery and removal of the miniature arc reactor and shrapnel in his chest. He is then seen throwing the arc reactor into the ocean before driving off in his car. The presentation of the identity claim and its specific form, however, challenge this interpretation. The claim is worded;

> My armour was never a distraction or a hobby, it was a cocoon, and now I'm a changed man. You can take away my house, all my tricks and toys, but one thing you can't take away - I am Iron Man.

Here, the idea that Stark has rejected the Iron Man identity, through the removal of associated technology that was previously required to lay claim to the assemblage identity, is undermined (*Iron Man 3*, 2013). Instead, the identity has become him. His self performances as Iron Man have produced the current Tony Stark/Iron Man.

Whilst this may seem to present a singular identity once more, particularly after the destruction of the suits, the voice over separates the elements of Stark’s biological materiality, troubling the closure that this scene appears to bring. Stark’s healing process is presented through a montage of jump cuts. This also appears to fragment Stark’s experiences, supporting the idea that he remains a dispersed self. However, the dispersal is

reified, away from diegetic elements and into the film's form.

Implied here is the idea that the technology of the online image/self is not required for a posthuman self. The technology merely allows the expression and development of an accurate and allowable expression of it. Thus, you are who you are without networked technology, but you can only perform it, produce it, mean it, and make it with the technology that affords it.

Furthermore, the transition of the representational strategy that presents the relationship between Stark and the dispersal of self online shifts in line with the naturalisation of ubiquitous mobile networked technology. At the beginning of the first film, the physical creation of the suit is highlighted through shots of Stark's sweat and muscles as he hammers away at thick metal plates over a roaring fire. The building sequence is a montage supporting the interpretation of separate instances of self performance that coalesce into the singular identity of Iron Man. Significantly, the powering up of the suit also suggests its capturing of self. At the end of the montage Dr Yinsen and Stark execute their plan to escape. Their captors become suspicious as Stark is away from their surveillance cameras in the cell for too long. They go to investigate and run into the prisoners' booby trap. Fighting ensues as Dr Yinsen takes it upon himself to distract their captors whilst the suit powers up. We jump between Stark and Yinsen as Stark gets increasingly frustrated at the speed of the suit powering up. Shots of the computer screen where Yinsen started the code that begins the miniature arc reactors energy production are shown occasionally to indicate the climbing percentage. Yinsen is shown running from captors having lost his weapon, he comes across a group of soldiers, ready to fire at him. We cut away to Stark as many gun shots are heard; the suit finally reaching 100% power as demonstrated by the light from the arc reactor that quickly builds to a bright glow.

The implication here is that, as the life drains from Yinsen, the suit is powered symbolically by his life essence. The suit therefore is set up as a receptacle of life, of self. This is continually reinforced by Stark's identity claims and the miniature arc reactor that both powers his suit and keeps the shrapnel away from his heart, keeping him alive.

The gradual development of the suit to increasing sleek forms and then the proliferation of suits

the third film indicate the evolution of Stark's self performances, becoming ever more machine shape to fit the aesthetic demands of our technological world.

Stark's appearances in the other MCU films inform the reading of the suit as representative of the relationship between the user and our self performances. In the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Stark creates a global protection system AI robot, Ultron. Ultron's programming gives him the mission to protect the earth; he identifies humans as the most major threat to the earth and so seeks to destroy them. The importance in this film lies in the use of empty versions of Stark's suit as drones. The disembodied suit is represented as disconnected from Stark, it does not actively participate in his performance of self or assemblage identity. Instead, these personality-less drones are used as mere foot soldiers. This is a contrast to the representation of the empty suits in *Iron Man 3* (2013) which Stark uses in a similar supporting role in battle. Those suits move fluidly, as though someone was inside them, and move in a way that indicates the physicality of the wearer would match the outside appearance of the suit.

Significantly, the drones of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) are taken over by Ultron to fight against Stark and the Avengers whilst Ultron carries out its plan. Simultaneously, two readings can be produced from this. Firstly, networked technology without the interaction of a human user is both devoid of life and dangerous. Networked technology alone threatens humanity as it cannot recognise the values that we can. Secondly, if the drones are understood to act in a similar role to the suits, as self performances, just without the obvious participation in the Iron Man assemblage, then the drones can be seen to represent the alienated self performance. Lacking their connection to their original performer, self performances can go rogue, producing alternative ideologies and indicating a doer performer where there is none.

Conclusion

The case study of Iron Man provides valuable insights into the development of the relationship between the user and self performances. It demonstrates how networked technology disperses the self across online spaces, extending the boundaries of personal

identity. This dispersion highlights the transformative influence of the web on our understanding of selfhood and the construction of online identities.

The affordances of the web play a crucial role in facilitating self-expression and self-definition. Features such as profile and avatar creation empower users to actively shape their online presence and engage in digital self-representation. These affordances enable users to construct virtual identities that align with their desired self-image, emphasising the performative nature of online interactions.

However, this interpretation is troubled by the continued role of neoliberal self-improvement and capital production imperatives. Whilst Stark exercises his agency in the claim to the Iron Man identity, he continues to respond to the press media’s image of him, claiming their name for his suit as his own. Moreover, Stark’s anxiety produces a proliferation of suits which can be seen to represent the anxious production of self-images to exist and be seen within networked neoliberalism.

Chapter 5: *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) and the persistence of online self performances

In this chapter, I seek to answer a question that arises from the previous chapter's revelation of the imperative to be visible; what happens to the self when the process of self production, or self-as-process, is made visible? To answer this question, I will explore the case study of series *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019). *Jessica Jones* engages with the concept of the digital archive the web's retention of self performances and communication as the content through which the web continues to subsist. The composition of the digital archive follows from the self performances and self-branding processes explored in the previous case study of the *Iron Man* (2008, 2010, 2013). By focusing on the persistence and accessibility of self performances that are captured online, *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) delves into the feeling of threat posed by networked archives to the coherence of the self, equating visibility with vulnerability (Bucher 2012: boyd 2014).

Jessica Jones (2015-2019) and the theme of archive

Jessica Jones (2015-2019) follows the eponymous character as she confronts her past. Jones is a private investigator in New York, living in a one-bedroom flat with little comfort. She abuses alcohol to continue functioning through her day as she experiences flashbacks to her time spent being abused by Kilgrave, a super-powered individual whose speech compels people to do as he says. Not only does the victim have to do as Kilgrave commands, but they also experience the desire to perform those actions, no matter how inconsistent that desire is with their own beliefs or feelings. In the first series, Kilgrave returns to convince Jones to be his partner of his own free will and sends others to stalk her and threaten those around her. Eventually, with the help of Trish, Jessica's adopted sister, and other victims of Kilgrave, Jessica manages to kill Kilgrave after failing to get him prosecuted for the abuse he has put her and others through.

Jessica Jones (2015-2019) centres archive through narrative focus. Jessica's role as private

investigator is to use archived information and produce evidence of witness to the suspected actions of the target. The series' interest in archives is set up from the first scene. The scene opens at night, in a dark underground car park where a man and woman have sex against a wall then in a car. The location, as well as the lack of talking, indicates the concealment of this illicit act.

In voice over narration, Jessica ironically comments "New York may be the city that never sleeps but it sure does sleep around". The voice-over narration, soft jazz music, urban setting, and moody lighting introduces the show's use of film noir tropes to centre the private investigator's role. Film noir is an older genre of film and the use of its aesthetics here evoke the idea of a media-based archive invading newer products and genres, such as that of the superhero.

Throughout the intimacy of the couple, the occasional click of a camera shutter is heard, and the screen produces a short freeze frame with a softer hue, indicating that Jessica has taken a photograph. The freeze frame highlights the importance of the act of recording. This is also supported by the washing out of the colours as it is removed from the vibrancy of real life into the sepia of memory or a harsher reality.

The stop in motion with the freeze frames contrasts the later flow of information/time that we see Jessica experience. The recording of these acts freezes a moment in time, separating it from its context. Its fragmentary nature highlights its lack of coherence with the impression of a happy marriage and family loyalty. This is an act, an (authentic) performance of self that is incoherent with the rest of the character's lives. To wander into the useful language of trauma, this is the traumatic event that cannot be subsumed - it is rejected, denied, fought against with the irrational action of attacking the messenger.

Despite the focus on the private investigator, Jessica herself is not seen until later in the scene. Instead, her presence is suggested through the narration and the overlaid aesthetics of camera shots being taken. Like Stark in the previous chapter, Jessica has a present absence highlighted by various forms of media. This present absence is reinforced through the use of silhouette for her first appearance through the frosted glass window of her office door. It suggests that, like Stark, Jessica experiences some form of disconnection from her

self.

A jump cut transfers the scene to a long and empty hallway. At the ended is the door to Jessica's office and home with the window bearing the name "Alias Investigations", the name of Jessica's company and a reference to the name of the origins comic series *Alias* that starred Jessica Jones (Bendis and Gaydos 2001-2004). Double silhouettes are seen on the window, suggesting two light sources inside the room. The doubling of the silhouettes speaks to the double lives that people lead, their public and private lives, or permissible lives and their illicit activities. The doubling of the shadow suggests a doubling of self performances, each one coherent by themselves but confusing and contrary when placed together as they suggest two different shapes or locations for the same physical individual.

The use of shadows, particularly before presenting the image of the protagonist, also alludes to Plato's parable of the cave where inhabitants of a cave understand the shadows thrown on the wall of the cave by the outside sun to be the full world. Anyone from outside the cave knows the true objects that throw these shadows. Just as the inhabitants of the cave perceive shadows as reality, the online self-performances and the digital archive can be seen as shadows, detached from the true experiences of individuals. The representation of archiving in the series underscores the role of others in capturing and revealing "true" self-performances and actions, highlighting the interconnectedness and social nature of online communication.

Moreover, the photos act as shadows of the events. While the challenge of the actions evidenced affect the client into anger and denial, the event of his wife's cheating has not been experienced by him directly; they are at an experiential distance from the act that has shattered his world.

This relationship between the ignorance of shadows and truth that lies behind them is dramatically laid out as Jessica throws the client through the window, the first demonstration of her superpowers. Jessica and the client can now be seen as the photos Jessica collected fly out of the client's hand and drift to the floor to a soft saxophone lilt. The truth behind the shadows, and the client's assumption of a functioning domestic life, has been shattered to reveal the truth underneath. The accompanying music and slow but steady zoom of the

camera towards the door encourages an acceptance of the truth whilst the physical violence onscreen suggests the shattering emotional effects of the rupture of present self-images. The doubling of the shadows collapses to the singular, physical bodies of the actors reinforcing the location of truth on the body and physical actions.

Significantly, the representation of archiving here emphasises the involvement of other people in the capture and revelation of “true” self performances and actions. As she often does in the series, Jessica acts as a connection. She is an intermediary - significant not as a witness but a deliverer of evidence. It is only through the client’s consequent witness of these photos that they affect social reality. Moreover, she is absent from the scenes she is witnessing with the audience placed in Jessica’s position in the initial capture of photographs, even observing the couple walking into the carpark before jumping to Jessica’s actual location inside the car park. The audience is another node in this communicative network, another entity interacting and witnessing media which captures one truth of the situation.

Even as the man is chucked through the window, she is entirely obscured by his body. The only representation we see of Jessica in this opening is her silhouette, focusing us instead on her voice and role as recorder as the photos float down. She is an observer, an investigator. She must be employed to observe and collect evidence. She cannot act without others, ironically replicating her situation as a victim to Kilgrave’s commands.

When we do finally see her face, it is upside down as we are presented with a shot from the client’s point of view as Jessica peers over the broken window to discuss “the matter of your bill,” (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015). Not only can she not act without others, when she does act, it is for the sake of capital production and accumulation. Her capture of other’s private lives is intertwined with the idea of producing capital from those self performances - moving the emphasis seen in *Iron Man* (2008, 2010, 2013) of the pressure on the individual user, to the idea of networks and connections with others, and their potential use of such online content.

Jessica’s position as a self-employed on short contract work that cannot act without others in a simultaneous virtual and physical communicative network mirrors the development of the

gig economy that relies upon intermediary apps and self-employed workers to fulfil clients' requests. The obfuscated physical and creative labour that sits behind the smooth interfaces of apps like Uber and other instant request services restricts the agency and performance of the workers as they conduct work on the app's behalf without the sense of belonging generated by traditional companies.

Jessica's absent presence replicates this hidden being. She is disconnected not just from her own self performances in this opening scene, but from the clients and products that she transfers. When the client shouts at her, she makes no response until the shattering of the glass, maintaining the idea of the invisible labourer who is not recognised by other users as sufficient or worthy of their attention.

In this opening scene, the series combines themes of self performance, virtual/physical boundaries, and the use of technology as capture or witness to raise questions about the impact of archived information on the coherence of self and the role of networks and connections in shaping identity. By emphasising the role of different forms of media from different times, the series suggests that digital archives can threaten our understanding of our current identities. By ending the scene with a reference to money, the economic dimensions of online self production are reintroduced.

Disgust and the potentials of identity theft

The series evolves its presentation of the truth of images to suggest another threat of the networked nature of online archives, the possibility of misrepresentation and manipulation. It does this through another of the scenes in its opening episode, setting up for the introduction of Kilgrave in the following scene. The feeling of disgust in this opening scene will later be paralleled by Jessica's responses to Kilgrave, supporting an interpretation of Kilgrave as representative of the networked archive.

After begging for work, Jessica has been commissioned by Hogarth, Chao & Benowitz, a law firm, to subpoena an elusive man. In this scene, Jessica poses as a personal secretary to discover the location of the man from his PA. She sits on the loo, half naked, hunched over on her laptop and talking to the personal assistant of her next target on the phone. Her voice

is distinctly different as she talks to the other woman, imitating a higher, nasally voice as she performs the persona of the type of woman she believes the personal secretary to be.

The camera slowly pans in towards Jessica from outside the bathroom door, never passing the threshold of the half-open door which partially obscures Jessica's body. The majority of the scene is filmed from outside the bathroom door. The angle obscures most of the room and Jessica's body, only showing us the edge of the laptop precariously balanced on the sink and Jessica twisting sideways on the loo to look at it, holding her phone to her ear. The gradual pan closer and the framing of the door and doorframe draws attention to the illicit activity of spying in this particularly private and intimate, or unseemly, space. This is supported by the low light which is a sudden contrast to the bright offices of the law firm in the preceding scene. The activity that Jessica performs is as illicit as the audience's observation of it.

The rare and short shots from inside the bathroom connect this illicit prying with Jessica's use of social media. Most shots from inside the bathroom are centred on the laptop screen as Jessica parses online information on the woman whose identity she is inhabiting for this deception. She is seen racing through social media webpages and photos to find information that will convince the woman of their shared history. As the camera jumps to the other side of the bathroom door threshold, into the private and intimate space, it mimics Jessica's movement into the private and intimate space of social media. Social media has a double bind; it is at once public, visible, needing to be seen, and it is also private, personal, for friends and acquaintances invited in, absolute performances of the self that people wish to be viewed or are unaware can be found. The abundance and accessibility of this information allows the deception, narratively. But the audience's focus is in this scene on the discomfort the palpable disgust and repulsion that such acts cause.

Jessica's voice reverts to her normal gravelly tone as she seizes on the location of the man. She realises and continues with the nasally voice as she thanks the PA for their help. A shot from inside the bathroom shows Jessica looking around for toilet paper as she finishes the call, she swears and slaps the empty cardboard tube so that it rolls around the holder.

The empty cardboard tube is a break from the success narrative. Jessica has enjoyed her

moment of success in accessing the information she needs, and now is confronted by emptiness, by a thing, broken, out of place, disused, uncared for, unprepared. There is no simple solution, no backup store of loo roll. It emphasises Jessica's in-the-momentness, her lack of preparation, her running late and running behind her own needs.

The empty toilet roll is also a reminder of discomfort in a very bodily sense, a sense of being unclean, dirty. The disgusting bodily feelings evoked by such an event are connected with the act of using private information for personal gain. In contrast to the opening sequence, Jessica is now the immoral individual doing the dirty work for the law firm and through deceptive acts.

Moreover, the empty toilet roll suddenly confronts Jessia with her own embodiment. This undermines the ease of which Jessica was able to perform as someone else by using their online self performances to appropriate their identity. This resonates with Braidotti's use of Haraway's situated knowledges (p. 33, Braidotti 2019). Whilst networked media allows for the persistence, visibility and accessibility of self performances online, the necessary embodiment of the user prevents their full appropriation of a separate identity (boyd 2014). Jessica's image or body will always prevent her egress from the identity assigned to her by her own experiences, memories and others' perception of her.

The repetition of rupturing in this scene is a formal mimesis of the disconcerting threat caused by the networked archive. The sudden break of the scene's mood with the exclamation "shit" mirrors the sudden shattering of the glass from the previous scene (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015). Its destruction of present understanding and perception of an event or person is sudden, rapid, and shocking.

Kilgrave as the threat of networked neoliberalism's imperatives

Superheroes need supervillains. The opposing ideals of superheroes and supervillains create a space where reactions to the same event can be seen as positive or a failure to adhere to societal values. Jessica's supervillain is Kilgrave. Kilgrave, as Jessica's supervillain, symbolises the power of masculinity and the patriarchy through his abuse and manipulation of others (Wigard, 2015). I want to go further and suggest that in Kilgrave's

specific temporal relationship of immediacy, valuing of luxury over substance, and the ability to produce desire in others, he embodies networked neoliberalism and enables the demands it places on individuals.

Kilgrave developed superpowers from the numerous, painful experiments that his parents performed on him to cure him of a neurodegenerative disease. In this situation, he had no agency. His parents made decisions for him including the decision to continue with the experimental treatments when Kilgrave (then Eric) wanted to stop. His superpowers and subsequent supervillain identity are reflective of this foundational trauma. Kilgrave's voice allows him to command the people around him. In a departure from conventional uses of the trope of hypnotism or psychic commands where the victim must obey the order regardless of how they feel, Kilgrave's words generate the desire in the victim to do the action Kilgrave has set them. This adds another layer to the violence that he enacts against other people as they recognise the abject feelings arose from within their experiential self.

Kilgrave's immediate fulfilment of desires reflects the speed and connectivity of networked technology. His desires are immediately responded to on his verbalisation of commands. The prompt fulfilment of his desire replicates the speed of networked technology in connecting the user with the items or platforms of their desire.

There is also a suggestion of the involvement of the hyperreal in this embodiment of networked neoliberalism. Kilgrave produces desires in his victims that they did not previously have, nor is their desire invoked by the object of the desire. Instead, the command precedes the user's interaction with stimuli that produce the desire. This is similar to the pre-emptive and automatic generation of targeted adverts and products on the web to inspire desire in the user based on their patterns of behaviour. It is a threat of the data complement of the archive that will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Significantly, the series avoids reducing Kilgrave's embodiment of the imperative to perform and to desire to one of disciplinary tyranny. Instead, Kilgrave is often shown using a network of others to communicate with Jessica. This is largely established through two major scenes although Kilgrave continues to use other people in his effort to control and manipulate Jessica.

Firstly, Jessica realises that Kilgrave is stalking her but as he is too afraid to come close to her for fear of being captured, it must mean that someone else is watching her for him. She is walking through a crowded street in New York. Initial shots of her show her looking around at the people that pass her chaotically. The scene then jumps to camera shots from above, dwarfing Jessica in the sea of faces of her potential observers. This can be understood to be a representation of the affordance of visibility, the potential for an audience witnessing self performances (boyd 2014). The high angle shot emphasises that this observation could be coming from any direction - the viewer is another unseen observer.

This scene materialises the flow of unseen users on the web. Together with Jessica's connection with digital archives, it highlights the vulnerability that comes from such archives being networked and alienated from the performer. Anyone in this crowd could potentially commit their own illicit acts of observation and record, as anyone online could potentially access or duplicate information from user's profiles. The user themselves has little way to have knowledge of who or what is done with their online self performances.

Moreover, as Jessica continues to investigate this unseen observer, she discovers that the primary culprit is her next-door neighbour. She follows him to a park where other people give him messages of where to sit and meet Kilgrave to pass him the physical photos of Jessica that he has taken. Again, the physicality of these photos connotes the irreversibility of the act of capture. The individuals involved in this communicative network replicate the infrastructure of our online world, acting as nodes of a network for information to flow through - a concept that will be further explored with Jessica's embodiment of the archive. Most significantly, this reinforces the view of society of control, with soft power and imperatives passing through the ideas and observations of an observant, and judgemental, public.

After using his powers to escape his parents' control, Kilgrave produces a supervillain self that has little desire outside of the symbols of luxury. Much like Stark at the beginning of the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013), his whole self performance is devoted to taking and producing signifiers of wealth without the success or stability that is supposed to come with it.

Kilgrave's costume and physical presentation reinforces his connection with wealth and

luxury. Kilgrave is portrayed as a slim, fit white man wearing a tailored and velvet suit. Kilgrave's clothing signifies expense whilst his physical form suggests the health that may arise for access to wealth. The suit is purple, an association arising from his initial appearance in the comics. This links the threats of the previous media iteration of the story with the present version. However, it also reinforces Kilgrave's connection with wealth, as purple is historically associated with royalty and luxury.

The association of Kilgrave with luxury is furthered through Jessica's retracing of her memories and his use of his powers to access extravagant items. Jessica investigates the disappearance of Hope, an athletic college student. She traces her movements through her credit card statements, from feminine and masculine boutiques buying a beautiful dress and a tie. Then, to a fancy restaurant where it is revealed that Jessica underwent the same pattern of purchasing during her dates with Kilgrave, as he commanded her to. Similarly, he commands the staff at the luxurious Asian restaurant to cook the same Italian meals that Jessica and he had on their date.

Kilgrave's recreation of events with Jessica reflects nostalgia and a desire to repeat aesthetics without emotional connection. Due to his powers, Kilgrave struggles to emotionally connect with others as he describes, "I never know if someone is doing what they want or what I tell them to!" (*Jessica Jones:* WWJD?, 2015). In this scene with Jessica at her old house, as he attempts to convince her to submit to a relationship with him without using his powers, he portrays himself as the victim of his own powers. The imperative to perform is executed in his words, his communication with the rest of the world, isolating him emotionally as the performances produced are for the fulfilment of the imperative rather than being driven by any desire issuing from the performer. This calls into question the desire of the user to participate in the culture of visibility enabled by the affordances of the web. Not only has the freedom to perform online become an imperative, but the user can no longer be sure if their desire to engage with networked society issues from them or merely the expectations of a society suffused with networked mechanisms.

Kilgrave commands the women he is with to smile - their visual and visible performance of a happy domestic life is more important than their authentic engagement with the situation.

This is a representation of some of the fears surrounding the imperative for self-performance of successful selves online. Instagram, in particular, is subject to societal criticism as a place where people become depressed on seeing the manipulated images of perfect lives that others appear to be having, feeling under pressure to produce their own successful images.

Kilgrave's enjoyment of luxury and power is achieved through his ability to control others and gain access to their resources. For example, his first hiding place in the city is the family's penthouse apartment. He commands the children to hide while the parents cater to him as servants, creating fancy meals to his exacting taste. His enjoyment of luxury is thereby a performance of power. He reproduces the power that wealth provides without owning any wealth himself. His superpower gains him access to people's homes and lives, but Hope is the one to provide the money for purchases.

This is also a representation of a similar invasion into private spaces that we have witnesses with Jessica's investigations. Kilgrave's entry to the family home is unchallenged - as if there is no firewall or security setting preventing his access. Kilgrave tells the parents of the family that he will be their guest. Due to his powers, the parents agree however this could also represent the misrecognition of parts of code as belonging to a website or a profile as having the correct permissions to access private areas. Stepping through the doorway, once again represents the crossing of the social, as well as the physical, boundary.

The prioritisation of style and symbol over the reality of the situation opposes the power that the image is supposed to hold. However, the power of image is reasserted as Jessica, as the embodiment of archive, dismantles Kilgrave's plans and eventually defeats him by killing him after having become immune to his powers. Jessica is the rupturing power of the archive to Kilgrave's performative imperative.

This is most potently demonstrated in an argument between Kilgrave and Jessica where they disagree with each other's interpretations of a past event. Flashbacks show Kilgrave's remembrance of the scene as he starts to narrate his memory to Jessica. It shows the couple together on a balcony enjoying a meal. Kilgrave goes inside to collect wine and on his return, they kiss without Kilgrave speaking. As Kilgrave's commands have a time limit, for him this is proof that Jessica chose to remain with him despite his powers.

Jessica angrily replies and narrates her version of events where she attempts to jump off the balcony as Kilgrave's power wears off whilst he is inside. He returns in time to shout her down from the balcony wall. The flashback ends as Kilgrave interrupts her to challenge "such revisionist bullshit" and claim that he remembers more accurately (*Jessica Jones:* WWJD?, 2015).

Here, the reference to "revisionist bullshit" links this argument over the truth with historical changes in the way that history is retold and remembered. History has in the last 50 years or so undergone a vital revision - form the prioritisation of stories of colonisers, placing the white wealth European intellectual male at the top of a hierarchy of selfhood, to a proliferation of alternate remembrances of events and histories from the perspectives of colonised peoples and marginalised groups within US and European countries. A British actor is cast as Kilgrave but uses an English accent, both for the symbol of upper classes that the British accent means to the US public imagination and for their conventional association with the villain -connecting to their historic conflicts with the US and other countries as a coloniser.

Jessica reiterates that she "remember[s] it all", as in not just the successful narrative that places Kilgrave in a position of power (*Jessica Jones:* WWJD?, 2015). She steps gradually closer to him, clearly reiterating her point as she stops herself from yelling at his face. The flashback restarts and shows that after Jessica steps down from the balcony, Kilgrave not only admonishes her for not listening to him, but he also commands her to cut off her ears as she does not need them if she will not listen to him. He stops her just after she makes the first cut to the back of her ear.

Jumping back to the present, Kilgrave continues to deny Jessica's memories - what is culturally known as gaslighting after the original *Gaslight* play (. She defiantly reveals to him the cut on the back of her ear, cementing her as the physical embodiment of the networked archive. Through her, information travels and leaves marks on her body and mind.

The success of Jessica's situated knowledge over the story that Kilgrave spins resonates with Braidotti's proposal for a critical humanities and cartography that enables the voices of those traditionally excluded from the subject position to be heard. Braidotti puts forward this idea in two locations. Firstly, in arguing for a critical posthuman framework that allows

interdisciplinarity and the cross-pollination of multiple perspectives to reintegrate the “missing people” of humanist pasts (p. 11, Braidotti, 2019).

Secondly, Braidotti also draws on Foucault and Adrienne Rich’s work on the politics of location to argue for the role of memory in the claiming of the subject position against narratives of humanist mastery. For Braidotti, a location is an “embedded and embodied memory.” Such memories can be activated “against the grain of the dominant social representations of subjectivity,”, and hence are counter-memories (p. 31, Braidotti 2013a). In this scene, the embodiment of Jessica’s counter-memories is highlighted in the scar she displays to demonstrate the truth of her version of events. Of course, the event is still undecidable, being both fictional and in the past of the narrative of the show. However, the series encourages the viewer to maintain sympathy with Jessica throughout, not least through her placement as the main character. Moreover, her connection with visual evidence reinforces the suggests that this physical evidence is truthful with the camera filming the series becoming the site of production of the visual evidence for the viewer.

Jessica and Kilgrave’s acts of remembrance are shown to be a distrustful mechanism of self production as memory is subjective and thereby conflict with other’s memories of events. As Fawns and Conway point out, the purposeful misremembering of the past helps us to maintain our present self-conceptions or self-images. Here, Jessica’s embodiment of the networked archive displays the threat of such an accessible archive to the cohesion of self. The static memory of Jessica’s cut as captured in her scar prevents the misremembering of the event to maintain Kilgrave’s narrative of his self and their supposed destiny together. Jessica, and the audience as the unseen observers of the truths that the scar speaks to, are the networked others that have access to Kilgrave’s past performance that contradict his current performance of self. This is just one of the scenes that play out the threat of archive to self-conception through the static images of the past preventing the dynamic mechanisms of self production in the present. I shall later discuss others and their production of affects as part of this exploration for the audience. However, here it is important to note that whilst the production of self performances has issued from Kilgrave and haunts Jessica, the networked archive also poses a threat to networked neoliberalism as the visibility of the self as a

changing, adapting and opposition to the coherence of Jessica's primary self image process challenges the production of self as a static product to be engaged with.

The desire to escape these imperatives is embodied in Jessica's behaviour following her initial escape from Kilgrave's control. She rejects the life of the superhero, using her powers for an unstable job. The superhero convention of the split between the civilian and superhero alter ego is again diverged from. Instead of the collapse of superhero and civilian identities to form one dispersed but coherent self, Jessica rejects the creation of a superhero identity. She does not engage in alter ego naming or costuming. In fact, her clothes stay approximately the same throughout the whole series: big black boots, jeans, and a black top. It is even suggested, in scenes where she drags herself hungover from her bed to greet clients, that this outfit is literally the same clothes that she picks back up off the floor each day.

Jessica's rejection of networked neoliberalism's imperative to perform as a successful self allows her to live on her own terms and escape the demands of society. This is a wish-fulfilment scene and attitude. The women and people who are expected by society to dress themselves up day after day are presented the gross opposite to enjoy as a rejection of society's expectations. And this is what Jessica is, a rejection of the need to fulfil networked neoliberalism's imperative to perform as a successful self and, thereby, produce capital. Instead, we see Jessica live paycheque to paycheque, unable to pay to fix her door and borrowing money from Trish to escape the city.

This is a stark contrast to the Jessica seen in flashback sequences (e.g. *Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015). Jessica here wears makeup, beautiful and expensive clothes, smiles and laughs, happily engaging with her conversation partner, Kilgrave, eating expensive food. Her day-to-day life away from Kilgrave is one of active alcoholism, social disconnection, gruff antisocial communication, darkness, boring clothes, and the wear and tear of a poverty-stricken apartment, much to the disappointment of Trish.

It is an active choice to reject the imperatives that initially traumatised her and to live as free as possible from the threat of connection and visibility. By maintaining these living conditions and lack of engagement with appropriate performances of self, Jessica can remain invisible

and thereby safe from Kilgrave/networked neoliberalism's demands and violence against the self.

Producing the successful woman: Trish and reflexive violence

Before moving on to discuss more of how Jessica Jones acts as an embodiment of the digital archive, I wish to discuss Trish as an ancillary character. Because of Trish's opposing ideals to Jessica, in spite of which she supports and cares for Jessica, a reading of her production of self can further inform our understanding of Jessica Jones' experience of competing temporal states and the absolute rejection of networked connections.

Trish's mother took in Jessica following the death of her parents in a car crash. Trish and Jessica have a difficult relationship, stemming from Trish's wild behaviour as a teenager and Jessica's care for Trish. Trish was pushed to be a child actor by her mother. Her mother would physically abuse her and restrict her diet, clothing and appearance choices, such as hairstyle. Trish, originally Patricia, became a child star of a television show "It's Patsy" as the eponymous Patsy. By the time of the series, Trish has reinvented herself and used her public image to engineer herself into a position as a podcast talk show host.

Trish acts to avoid failure. Her mother, she says, was terrified of other people's failure, their failure to use their gifts and abilities. These are words we have heard from Trish herself in repeated comments on Jessica's refusal to use her superpowers for good, she does not deserve them if she is not going to use them. Trish therefore seeks success in all aspects of her life. Initially, this was through obeying her mother and being raped by directors to become a successful actor. Then drug use to perform as a successful music artist. These issues come up as a matter of flashbacks or spoken backstory in the series.

Within the series' main timeline, Trish is a radio talk show host then shopping channel presenter at the same time as vigilante superhero. She even recognises that the man she is with, a news anchor and investigative journalist, she is with because she wants to be him not with him. In these roles, it is recognition and fame that Trish equates with success. Money and attractiveness accompany them. Trish performs her best in all these roles despite its effect on her health, mental and physical. This need to apply her abilities drives her to

villainy, to murderous vigilantism and hence incarceration. Before this point however, Trish's entire self performance is predicated on producing a desirable self, one appreciated in society, until she sees herself as above society's consensus. The fall to villainy is accompanied with the loss of the symbols of success seen with Trish through the earlier series. Her clothing is more plain, she swaps her apartment for an empty loft with a barely functioning kitchen, she loses her show and must make do with being a presenter for a shopping channel.

Trish is important to the series' representation of self performances and the threat of archive because of the representation of Trish's feelings arising from her past and the pressure to perform a successful, desirable self.

Firstly, Trish's apartment is a physical manifestation of the self work that she has had to undergo to maintain her successful persona. The first appearance of Trish in the show, apart from posters advertising her show, has Jessica interrupt a meeting with her show's team at her flat (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night). Jessica stands waiting behind the wide glass doors that lead onto a balcony. The glass between Jessica and Trish represents the lack of boundary between them. Trish's life is open and visible to Jessica, but Jessica respects her privacy despite this and remains hidden from Trish's colleagues.

Trish's apartment's wide, white and empty spaces contrast with Jessica's small and dingy flat. The territorial lines of the many rooms of Trish's flat, brought to the audience's attention through shots that emphasise the hard edges and lines of counters and walls in the living space. This rigid space suggests the compartmentalisation Trish maintains to produce the successful persona that her colleagues and the public recognise. This speaks to the disciplinary nature of neoliberal discursive formations, encouraging the production of a desirable self that can be the site of an extraction of value (Foucault 2020; Hearn 2008). Jessica's interruption of Trish's ongoing business meeting highlights this production of self for value – it is Trish's image as a commodity sign that is under discussion as part of her role in producing a podcast (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015). The separation of Jessica then becomes a symbol of Trish's rejection of emotional displays as part of maintaining her image.

Moreover, we learn that Trish has a panic room, a safe space that is locked from the inside in the case of an attack. There is no discernible threat to Trish presented throughout the series until she purposefully antagonises Kilgrave so that Jessica can find him. Otherwise, the existence of a panic room suggests a compartmentalisation of stress. Trish's feelings are locked away to ensure that she can continue to produce a successful and desirable self performance.

The harsh lines of Trish's apartment are reflected in the spaces she works in, with the podcast recording studio having a similar separation of her and Jessica on two sides of the soundproofing glass as she antagonises Kilgrave. The constant territorialising lines suggest that Trish actively cuts off or dispenses with parts of her wider self to produce the successful persona that the public expects.

Trish's frustration at not being the object of Kilgrave's desire is an expression of the need to fulfil the imperatives of networked neoliberalism for some unknown reward. She does not seek any reward from Kilgrave himself, but to be the object of someone's desire is to be visible. Trish is always trying to increase her visibility to maintain the success that she has.

At the same time Trish's anxiety to protect herself manifests in the rejection of conventional success, the rich, attractive and moral husband, for the achievement of physical strength and alternative self performances. She becomes addicted to performance enhancers in an effort to prove that she can be like Jessica, strong and independent.

Trish then, despite not being superpowered for much of the series, is acting an ideological seam. On one side the feminist that strives for independence and freedom from the control and violence of others; on the other, the neoliberal quest for success and visibility which means submitting the cultural power of the image, of public perception and acceptance of your self performance.

Moreover, as she seeks to become more like Jessica, she organises a photoshoot in the persona of Hellcat, a superhero she makes up despite not having powers (*Jessica Jones:* We Ain't got Fun, 2015). Like Tony Stark's quest for redefinition through changing image, Trish seeks redefinition from her media personalities through an idealised superhero self. It

is the visual witness that photographs provide that is highlighted as an aspect of archive, rather than the nature of its medium. Without being recorded in image, the suspected or desired self-performance does not exist; once recorded, they cannot be denied.

However, Trish must continually compete with her past self performances, frozen as they are in similar photographic images. Twice in the series she is recognised from her performances as “Patsy,” (*Jessica Jones:* Freak Accident, 2015). One fan comes up behind her to give her flowers. Trish reflexively hits the fan, not realising what is happening. Her physical reaction expresses the fear of an eruption of past selves that will threaten the coherence of her self-image. Trish’s past continues to haunt and threaten her current self performance.

This introduces archive's threat to the coherence of self through the threat to the stability of the self-image and lifestyle that people perform. The archive of Trish’s past images presents threats to her current self-coherence while her ideal self threatens to override her rationality. More specifically, it is static images of Trish and the hard lines of her compartmentalisation that threaten her current self, against the dynamism of memory work that must be undergone to maintain self coherence.

The overwhelming flow of information: networked spaces and convergent media

Jessica Jones is the embodiment of the networked archive. She is also an embodiment of the user that is affected by the digital archive because the distinction between the archive and the self is lacking in a world where we prioritise the online performance of self for whatever purpose. As discussed in the previous chapter, the self becomes dispersed across physical and virtual spaces only to be reunified across these spaces as the distinction between them collapses. *Iron Man 3* (2013) barely has time to introduce this concept; for Jessica Jones, it is central to their heroine’s experience of life. What is remarkable about *Jessica Jones’* (2015-2019) representation of this phenomena specifically is the use of formal features to convey the affective power of the networked archive.

In this section I will begin by explaining the series’ approach to different forms of archive and

the way that the series makes a distinction between different forms of memory practice. I will then discuss a few key scenes that hold the basis of the show's formal strategies in their representation of the threat posed to current self-conceptions by the networked agency of past selves and the challenge to perception caused by the affects arising from it.

Firstly, the series blurs the distinction between different types of archives, merging digital and analogue, physical and virtual, and internal and external materials for the same purpose. In Jessica's investigations, we witness her seamless transition between information displayed on computer and phone screens, paper files, online sources, and digitised media from older formats such as VHS tapes. The primary visual representation of this information to the viewer is through shots of screens or files, underscoring the visual nature of the archived content.

An intriguing manifestation of the collapsing boundaries between physical and virtual archives is observed through the use of photographs. Although captured with digital cameras, the evidence in the form of photos is typically presented to clients as printed copies enclosed in large brown envelopes, symbolising their status as tangible documents. This suggests that the value attributed to these images lies not solely in their digital nature but in their physical presence. However, other forms of video evidence are also utilised and created throughout the series, indicating that the significance of images resonates with the expression of self through visuals, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Moreover, the series portrays digital networked communication in various formats, reflecting a media ecology without a hierarchical distinction of focus or importance. Instead, the distinctions within the archive are based on the dynamic or static nature of the materials and their level of connectivity. This blurring of boundaries and the fluidity of media forms underscore the interconnectedness and coexistence of different archive types within the narrative.

The distorting agency of past selves

In the first episode, Jessica is shown unable to fall asleep after handing off the subpoena she was given by the law firm (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015). She packs a bag with

her camera and flask of alcohol and arrives at a street lit by streetlamps. She uses her superstrength to jump to a fire escape and appears to settle down for a stake out. There is no context as to why Jesscia is there. Her voice over narration merely indicates that the place is connected with a previous case; "In my line of work, you've got to know when to walk away. But some cases just won't let you go," (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015).

The voice over narration and the accompanying slow jazz led by piano once again evokes film noir. Combined with the narration's reference to the past not “let[ting] you go”, reinforces the suggestion that the past can exert agency over our present. This is evidenced in other gothic tropes of haunting as ghosts are the virtual selves of the physical being that is dead and gone who continue to haunt our present - an association that is pulled on in later scenes. Here, the suggestion of haunting introduces the idea of temporal slippage; the way the past, our archive of feeling, holds on to and seeps into the present.

Most shots of Jessica are obscured by the frame of the fire escape or the silhouetting of the bright neon lights behind her. Again, the audience's distance from Jessica is emphasised and their observation of her is placed within the physical space of the scene; the audience are not immune to mise-en-scene, nor are they omnipresent or omniscient. The space is instead maintained as a 3-dimensional space, rather than a smooth arena where the camera is in complete control and has the power to move as it wishes.

Jessica pulls out her camera and begins surveying the inhabitants of an apartment block above a bar. The windowed shots into their lives are emphasised as we cut between side-on shots of Jessica’s face and the windows, looking as she does into the privacy of these people’s homes. The shots of the windows are not static, they bob and are timed to cuts away from Jessica raising the camera to her eye, implying that we are seeing what she is seeing through the camera, despite the lack of any digital overlay that may confirm this.

The rectangular windows are literally windows into the private lives of these people. The distanced and angled shots through the rectangular frames echo the shots of the two previous scenes where we were looking at Jessica through the bathroom door. This observation then is again connected with the "dirt", the abject of public self performances and the immoral/illicit action of looking. This is thematically connected and reinforced through

the content of the scene and windows as the aspects of private lives focused on are examples of hypocrisy and deceit. The individuals in question have security settings available to them in the form of blind and curtains but have chosen not to use them. The show's connection of Jessica with networked technology to this point suggests that this scene can be read as representative of the free flow of private information that people are unaware of as they go about their lives in networked spaces.

Again, Jessica is acting as a connection, this time between the audience and these people's private information. Her responses to what she witnesses guides the audience's response and reinforces the idea of the misrepresentation or manipulation of public images to present a successful, but inauthentic persona. A woman is seen jogging on a treadmill, but as she stops her exercise she picks up and begins to eat a burger. In the voice over narration, Jessica remarks "2 minutes on a treadmill, 20 minutes on a quarter pounder," (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2015). A similar instance occurs with another window where a man dressed in a suit picks up a woman's shoe and sniffs it. Jessica breaks the line of sight to lower her camera and exclaim "eugh!". Jessica's responses mimic the intended purpose of content - to engage fellow users no matter the actual emotion of the response. Her narration mirrors the commenting of judgments and messages of support on online photos and posts. This again reinforces an interpretation of the scene as responding to the risks and emotions connected with the affordance of visibility (boyd 2014). The affective plane of the web allows such emoitonal responses as disgust to move the user, in this case Jessica and the camera, away from the content (though only after contributing such content through an emotional response) (Dean 2010).

This need to respond is doubled through the formal encouragement of the audience's attention to be on Jessica and her emotional responses through the voice over narration and close ups of Jessica's face. The close-ups are however unusual in that they show the face from the side. Along with the distance to Jessica caused by the obscuring of her features by elements of the scene, it suggests that the audience is engaged in another illicit act of one-sided viewership.

This is significant to the series' presentation of the threat of networked archive and will be

built upon in later scenes. The user-performer and producer of content is ultimately unaware of who will see their performances and when or where those performances will be captured. Moreover, in contrast to pre-networked media times where performances in social arenas were transitory or difficult to capture as they occurred, all moments of a person's life are capturable and potentially shared.

The distance between Jessica and the audience is also significant as the audience are invited to witness her emotions but not necessarily to feel along with her or take on her aesthetic so neoliberal rejection. The audience themselves as observers are rejected through this distance as Jessica's ideology of rejection infects the camera. It is instead a war of visibility; Jessica wishes not to be visible but the audience wishes to see her.

Unlike the opening scene where Jessica’s photographs are highlighted, we only hear the shutter click, there is no accompanying freezeframe. We are disconnected from the act of record though reminded that it exists. The distance between our view and Jessica's is reinforced despite the timings with Jessica's looks and pulls away from looking. There is less emphasis on the act of archiving here. There is no evidence to be collected for a later time; this is personal. Archive, and its threat to stability of the perfect self comes from a different direction; it is also personal here.

Upon seeing Luke, a character that will later be introduced as the husband of a woman that Jessica killed for Kilgrave, the music changes to slow swelling strings. Jessica slowly lowers the camera to look at Luke staring pensively and resigned out of the window, away from her. She does not take a photo here, suggesting it is something she does not want to remember.

However, her lowering of the camera supports a redirection from the external archive and act of recording to the internal archive of self, memory. She refuses to distance herself or take photos of Luke. Instead, she is emotionally connecting in this moment. By removing the camera, she takes away artificiality, the distance, emotional connection from what she is looking at. This suggests that the act of recording or producing images flattens the emotion of the scenes which it preserves.

The scene ends with Jessica’s first panic attack of the series. Jessica leans back and closes

her eyes sadly. The camera slowly pans in towards her as she breathes, slowly shrinking the frame around her producing the sense of being pushed in by overwhelming feeling, or the attempt to keep that feeling at bay.

The bright neon sign behind her changes from a strong red to purple and a silhouette of a man's face enters from the left-hand side softly saying, "You want to do it, you know you do," (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night,205). This represents the first escape of Jessica's emotions and past experiences into her present experience. The formal distortion of light will become a common feature across the series representing the power of this historical affect upon Jessica.

Up until this point, because of the angle of the shots of Jessica and the windows, the audience has remained on the right-hand side of Jessica. This effectively obscures half the scene from the viewer and allows for the possibility of Kilgrave actually being there in person. It also ensures that it is a surprise for the viewer when Kilgrave's silhouette suddenly erupts onto the scene to threaten Jessica. The sudden rupture of the present moment echoes the earlier uses of this sharp change.

A jump cut to the previous bright colours maintains the frame size but moves to the left showing there is no man there in reality, and Jessica's face is maintained in the right of the screen as her eyes blink open and she begins panting sharply. She recites street names, later discovered to be the streets of her childhood, as she calms her breathing. As she does this the camera slowly pans back out.

The gradual pan, change of colour and music, and sliding in of Kilgrave's silhouette from the left indicates a flowing kind of movement. Specifically, the affectual flow of information issuing form Jessica's past experiences of abuse by Kilgrave that distorts our perception of the scene and Jessica's perception of the moment. The jump cuts realignment of Jessica and the colours, demonstrating the absence of Kilgrave reinforces this in its suddenness, opposed to the gradual flow of Jessica's emotional state. The following gradual pan out is in line with Jessica's emotional state that is gradually becoming more relaxed as she reassures herself that she is not still experiencing Kilgrave's abuse. The alignment of the camera's movement and lighting manipulation indicates that affect is the primary actor that produces

the distortion, rather than an outside force from producers or Kilgrave himself. It is not an attack but a bubbling over of emotional pressure from inside.

The recitation of place names could be understood as the exertion of control through the territorialising lines of physical space over the free flow of affectual information across virtual spaces - in this case the emotional interior of Jessica and the formal feature of the series which exist outside of the diegetic space of the series. However, such as reading would ignore that Jessica is using words to evoke her memory of a safe past experience, one that precedes her experience of Kilgrave. As such, instead of physical spaces being used to control virtual information. Physical and virtual are brought together in the purposeful remembrance and evocation of a past self to overcome the power of the affect and agency of the traumatised self. By traumatised self here I refer to the version of Jessica that is stuck in the reliving of the affect suffered as a result of realising the abuse and lack of self that Kilgrave's commands produced in Jessica. Not having been able to experience such feelings in the moment, the feelings attempt to assert themselves across Jessica's life. Moreover, as Cathy Caruth (1996) has described, traumatic moments in someone's life are marked by their inability to be reconsolidated with the wider self. Trauma is the extreme loss of selfhood through its denial by others. Therefore, it is not possible to reconstitute the self with this experience. Instead, as shown here, the experience competes for space within the self that continues after the trauma, the victim attempts to replace the survivor.

With the wider series resemblance of networked spaces and concerns with the networked archive, this traumatic, overflowing affect can be read as a product of past self performances being captured online. They are not, however, an issue until they are reencountered. This can be through the activity of other users which is the threat of accessibility and revelation shown in the opening scene and reinforced through Kilgrave's use of a network of people to supply him with updates on Jessica's life and photos of her.

Alternatively, this threat of re-encountering past selves can be caused by platforms algorithms (Jacobsen and Beer 2021a; Beer 2017). As Jacobsen and Beer discuss, the affordance of searchability, being able to find information online, flows back onto the user. The trace information left by user's interaction with online content, and the capture of this

data in the form of metrics, allows the user to be searched for and targeted according to the patterns of their behaviour (p. 11, Jacobsen and Beer 2021b). Facebook is specifically known for its memories feature, where past content is presented to the user on anniversaries of its posting. Because the algorithm does not have access to the rest of the user's life, the content presented can often be irrelevant or otherwise challenge the coherence of the user's present (Jacobsen and Beer 2021b). The exertion of this non-human entity of the past self performances of the user can rupture their sense of self and reinforce the conception of self being dispersed across objects and virtual spaces as the algorithm seeks to assert past content as present to ensure engagement. In this way, the power affect demonstrates through the distortion of the screen could represent the actions of non-human entities as they give rise to unintended affects in an attempt to inspire engagement.

Overall, in this scene, *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) introduces the idea of combined physical and virtual spaces, with affect flowing freely from different times, distorting our perception of the present. This replicates the user's encounter of content and self performances from different times that can be misrecognised as the present depending on how the content is encountered. The connection of this affect with Jessica's abuser, previously shown to be an embodiment of networked neoliberal ideals, suggests that the effect of networked neoliberalism is one of traumatising challenges to the coherence and formation of self.

The virtual-physical and networked spaces

Jessica Jones builds upon the idea of the ability of affect arising from past selves to effect and distort the world around it. In doing so, the series suggests that, not only are the spaces that Jessica inhabits hybrid spaces, Jessica herself is part of a free flow of information in these spaces. To demonstrate this, I will analyse another sequence from the first episode in greater detail; Jessica's retracing of the events she shared with Kilgrave in her investigation of Hope's disappearance.

As previously mentioned, Jessica begins by checking Hope's credit card statements online and using these to produce a timeline of where Hope has been. Here, the use of online media to discover more about someone's private and personal life is established before a

greater exploration of the feelings arising from this. Jessica explores family photos as well as photos of Hope engaging in sports at her college. It is easy for Jessica to access this information. This reinforces the earlier impression of ease of access of the digital archive of self performances, building on Jessica's appropriation of the personal assistant's identity early in the first episode. As Andrew Hoskins proposes, "The temporalities of our communications with others and the instantaneous or near-instantaneous accessibility of individual and public archives transcends the more retrospective and static documenting and the archiving cultures of previous eras" (2009: 41). Communication online becomes immediately archived in the sense that it does not act as a continuing document to be returned to, but each slice of information persists in various accessible and visible forms (body 2014; Bucher 2012).

During her investigation here, a non-diegetic phone call between her and Hope's mum plays, revealing that Hope's mum has a different impression of Hope than what her credit cards seem to represent. The credit card data is not an active performance of self but an instance of data capture that informs the perception of Hope by others.

The purchases made my Hope contrast with her mother's description of a "frugal" girl. Jessica continues to lie for Hope, explaining to her mother that the purchases are "nothing unusual," (*Jessica Jones:* AKA Ladies Night, 2019). In this way, the power that image has for Jessica, in the proof it provides of the reality of situations, is expanded to other forms of information. The data of the credit card receipts, photos online, and Jessica's own experiences all mingle together as the material of an understanding of self performance away from the performer.

Jessica then goes to visit the boutiques where Hope bought clothing for herself and as a gift for her date. These scenes are quickly brushed over with Jessica's narration summarising the conversation she has with the store clerks. The shots of the boutiques blend into one another as the camera continues to pan across the store fronts, the dynamism of the camera's movement contrasting with the static store fronts photo like windows. The contrast here, as Jessica unknowingly relives her past, is that of the dynamism of active memory practices and static capture of the past. Past experiences can exert force upon the present

and they can be misremembered and misrepresented, but they cannot be rewritten.

The most striking elements of this scene however come in Jessica's discovery of the restaurant. We cut to a long shot of Jessica walking down the road to the restaurant and street sign which is gradually obscured by a car, showing that the shot is taken from across the street. The music changes as we cut to a shot from behind the restaurant's glass door showing Jessica, open-mouthed, checking the restaurant sign. She simply states "No. No way" as her breathing gets heavier and she packs away her notebook hurriedly before entering past the camera.

Here the physical location is marked out as a lieu de mémoire, a place that holds memories. The sight of the restaurant has sparked Jessica's memories and in her affected state, the rapid breathing and concerned look, the physicality of the actor echoes the affected state that Jessica was in earlier this episode, during her first panic attack of the series.

Jessica enters and discusses Hope with the Maitre D, checking if this is the restaurant that used to be "Il Rosso". The Maitre D looks concerned as he explains that Kilgrave entered with Hope and commanded the employees to make an Italian meal, despite the restaurant having changed to Asian cuisine.

As he explains this, we are shown Jessica breathing anxiously. Behind her, the space of the restaurant's entryway is gradually filled with the memories that Jessica has of this place. A more traditional European interior is overlaid onto the modern architecture of the restaurant. Jessica rushes through whilst the Maitre D continues talking, going to the back of the restaurant to see the table where she sat. As she does, her memories are superimposed across the space continues and we see a busy night with waiters and customers moving through the space.

The overlaid memory is choppy, with small jumps in time making people appear blurry. Similarly, the light within this memory fluctuates and flashes. The colours of the scene are muted, almost greyscale with hints of yellow towards light sources. Whilst there is no sound of shutters clicking or inclusion of a camera, the flickering images and fluctuating light suggests the closing of a camera shutter. This ensures that whilst the audience are aware no

physical record had been taken, these images still belong to an archive, that of Jessica's memory.

Jessica finally sees the table where she sat and focuses on herself within the scene, smiling and chatting with Kilgrave as if she were enjoying herself. She faces, literally, a homospatiality of distinct selves due to their location different locations in time. Here, "time becomes spatialised, distributed over the surface of the screen" (Garde-Hansen, 2009: 144). Garde-Hansen refers here to the effect of performing self on social networking sites like Facebook. However, the remark is appropriate to the situation where Jessica's experience of time is dispersed through her surroundings. This is similar to the experience of encountering past self-performances online, which are phenomenologically perceived indifferently to current self-performances.

Finally confronted with the self that she refuses to accept as her own, she runs from the restaurant and continues to run as day turns to night. The shots here come from in front of Jessica, on a low angle looking up with the same distorting effect of choppy editing and time jumps reinforcing the idea of her continued distress.

What is significant about this scene is the way in which Jessica's memories are overlaid on the physical space around her. We have seen already the affective power past selves on formal features. Here, the flow outwards of Jessica's memories, supported by the fade in of the memories across the space behind Jessica, suggest that it is not just spaces that are hybrid, people are too. In fact, the information that both spaces and people hold is able to flow between and through both. The physical space triggers Jessica's remembrance, but the emotion those memories holds flows out of her and to the space around her as visually represented by the overlay of scenes across the set.

As already discussed, Jessica has been used as a connection between people through the information she gathers through her witness and recording of events. Here, she becomes not just a connection but a node in an information network. The anxiety associated with this flow of information suggests that the user's state as a node in an information network that allows the free flow of their information outwards and other's information inwards is felt to be overwhelming.

The sudden departure of Jessica from the restaurant at the sight of her past self tells us about the feelings of the user as they encounter past performances. Because digital archives capture information as it was at the time, past self performances cannot be misremembered to ensure coherence with the current self. This is another danger of the networked archive. It is not that the truth must be hidden of edited to ensure the success of the individual in the present, but that self as a dynamic process of thought, desire, emotion and the misremembering of the past to ensure the cohesion of values and self-images is disrupted through the static capture of past self performances that have been abjected but able to be reencountered without warning or the intention of the user. That is the primary difference to previous archives where the active seeking of reencounter with the past was more often than not required in order to view them. This is shown in the scene where Jessica and Kilgrave argue over their interpretation of events, with the physical mark on Jessica as the static capture of that moment in time preventing Kilgrave's wilful misremembrance from reinforcing his understanding of the present.

Moreover, the destruction or deletion of incoherent or abject self performance is no longer a viable method for ensuring the coherence of self presentation. Whilst impression management and self-branding methods allow for some curation of self, there is always the potential for others, human or nonhuman, to have captured the activity you wish to destroy. *Jessica Jones*' (2015-2019) brilliance comes in its ability to capture the anxiety that this inability to maintain coherence inspires. Providing the past self with the affectual power to distort both Jessica and the audience's perception recognise the increased agency provided to memory through networked structures.

Haunting spectres and the threat of misrepresentation

Despite the representation of Jessica's role as a witness to events, the static capture of past self performances is not sufficient to prevent the misremembering of events to support the current self. The separation of the performer from self performances online allows for the free access to those performances by others, both human users and nonhuman structures. As shown, this means that networked technology affords agency to past selves and the affects arising from their challenge to the present self-image. However, it also provides the

opportunity for other entities to manipulate and misrepresent other people's identities.

Kilgrave repeatedly does this throughout the series. Firstly, the narrative conceit of using his powers to elicit desires in other people suggests that the individual's psychic selves are leaky, accessible and vulnerable. The desires are planted within Kilgrave's victims and indistinguishable from the experiences those individuals have of their own desires and emotions.

Secondly, Kilgrave pretends to be Jessica, using her phone to message Hogarth, setting her up to be made into another of his victims. This scene takes place at Jessica's childhood home which Kilgrave has bought in an effort to rewrite her past and ensure that she will submit to being his partner. This is an attempt to manipulate the virtual-physical space of the house and Jessica's memories. As he wanders around the house, he comes across a seam of wallpaper peeling and slowly caresses it as he peels it back to reveal Jessica and her sibling's height lines. His tenderness with the physical structure of the house is palpably disconcerting giving the manipulation that he is attempting on Jessica. His interaction with the wall is almost intimate. Added with the convention of the series to use physical spaces as manifestations of Jessica's memories, the act feels like a violation. This is Jessica's private home through which Kilgrave consistently crosses boundaries and uncovers what is hidden – much like when she investigates and reveals the "dirt" beneath the successful exterior. But unlike the people that Jessica is shown to investigate, Jessica is repeatedly shown as a hybrid entity herself, as someone whose interior life is flowing outwards and through her from the spaces around. The violation here then arises from the physical destruction of boundaries indicating the manipulation and destruction of psychic or emotional ones.

Here the house is also supposed to be a static capture of Jessica's safe past. As we know, she recounts the streets of her safe childhood home to return from her anxiety attacks. In this she evokes her safe childhood self to take charge of the situation, granting it an agency to overcome that of the self. This is Jesica's true homospatiality as a superhero. She may not have a costume or differently named alter egos. Her alternate selves instead arise from different moments in time, competing for control of the physical space that is her body. In

entering her home and using its memories as part of his manipulation of Jessica, Kilgrave violates this safe temporal self that.

Lastly, Kilgrave attempts to relive the date he had with Jessica by literally recreating it with Hope. Jessica's encounter with his recreation calls into question her ability to distinguish between the past and present. The use of horror tropes and aesthetics, not used within the rest of the series, suggests a manipulation of form.

Following a discussion with Trish in which Jessica's PTSD and attempt to be a hero is discussed, Jessica gives up on fleeing from Kilgrave to "do something" and returns to the hotel where he took her for his idea of a one-month anniversary. As she steps out of the taxi, the door attendant recognises her and welcomes her back, asking if she will be staying with them again. Jessica remains silent, open-mouthed looking around, as if seeing the place for the first time – as she was under Kilgrave's control when she was last here.

We then see her in a corridor, at the end of which is the door of the hotel room Kilgrave took her to. The shots here are very angled, keeping Jessica only just in shot and mainly displaying the wall of the corridor. The camera pans to reveal a sign above her as she looks down the hall, it reads "EXIT".

Spotlights of the corridor lighting places Jessica in isolation suggesting either areas of safety or unseen observation. Jessica is at the opposite side of the frame to the door, but the door is above her, indicating a difficult movement towards the door, an angled slope, yet the

mise-en-scene largely blocks the camera from travelling that way as Jessica passes beneath it. A dolly zoom is used on the door indicating the emotional rejection of this place of trauma and the tension/anxiety Jessica has in reapproaching it. There is a clear effort to evoke the horror aesthetics of films such as *The Shining* (1980) with its illogical and winding spaces.

The dolly zoom is shot so that we can see an EXIT sign gradually revealed again above the room door this time. Whilst these signs indicate fire escape routes, the placement has the obvious effect of suggesting a need to avoid this room; it is a warning. The idea of fire escapes themselves tie them back to Jessica's earlier surveillance of Luke, which as is revealed later in series is due to her experiences with Kilgrave.

The camera jumps back to Jessica, who breathes heavily, composing herself for the confrontation. Next to her left hand is a fire alarm. This idea of the fire alarm is one of sudden ruptures to normality. A fire alarm is not always the sign of a real emergency either but will always spark a culturally expected panic in the people in the building, inspiring a need to leave, escape. Jessica hesitatingly pulls the alarm – the hesitation possibly indicating a wish not to be alone for this confrontation overridden by a sense of social responsibility, she must get civilians out of the way.

It is due to the fire alarm that both a ringing and flashing begin – mirroring Jessica's panic response/flashback from the hotel. As she moves slowly down the hallway, she tilts her head to avoid the light flashes, as some turn to purple and show the silhouette of a man standing. We flick back to Jessica who looks away and shakes her head slightly as she continues walking. We focus on her face with the flashes behind her in white and those on her face of a slightly purple hue. Flicking back to the door, behind her shoulder, the corridor and Jessica moving through it is now blurred (creating a doubling effect) like her flashbacks indicating the takeover of emotion in her perception. In contrast to the visual archive that we have seen in terms of photos and social media, her memory and perception is blurred. The truth of the visual archive is contrasted with these blurred lines of memory.

Kilgrave's silhouette is then suddenly in front of her, by a metre, then a half then in front of her face is rapid succession, wearing a different outfit and appearing for less than a second so disorienting to the viewer trying to recognise his shape. Jessica looks to the side again, continuing her walk then hesitates in front of the door. She enters the room, we look at her in a medium shot coming through the door then pan to see what she is looking at, a window in a dark room wash lit by a mild purple hue. Jessica is lost on the left of the frame then reappears walking towards and past the window from the right of the frame. She has walked around us, I believe it to be disorienting for the viewer as they have no safe indication of the people entering the frame – like in Jessica's dream and flashbacks where Kilgrave can enter from anywhere, now we do not have the safety of Jessica as a focal point.

As she crosses into another room, a man's arm enters from behind the doorway to touch her shoulder. The camera jumps in front of her, with the hand still on her shoulder but her body

blocking the rest of the man's shape, she whips around her hair whipping up and continuing to hide his face then he is gone, and the door behind her is shown open.

There is a big series of jump cuts here, in front and behind of Jessica, increasing tension as we look around for the next attack that Jessica is bracing herself for. We then jump cut to the inside of the bedroom, looking out at Jessica through the door opening – just like in the loo scene. The importance of this mirroring lies with the "dirt" the physical dirt and discomfort of the body. Hope, we will find out, has wet herself in the bed as she was not allowed to move. Moving into the room and confirming with Hope that Kilgrave is not there, the camera changes from stable shots to shaky cam. Jessica has stopped anticipating facing him.

Here, horror aesthetics are used to build a sense of tension and threat that ought to arise from Jessica's remembrance of her abuse. Significantly, the purple lighting and distorting visual effects are never seen when Kilgrave is actually physically within a scene. Instead, the distortion is specifically aligned with Jessica's emotion.

The images of Kilgrave in silhouette, jumping around in time with the flashes of light, are reminiscent of haunting ins horror films. The ghostly nature of him indicates his virtual state, or rather the virtual state of the information that composes him. It is not Kilgrave that presents the threat in this scene but Jessica's state as a node for free-flowing information. The flow of information sparked by this location *conjures* Kilgrave, recreating him from the archive of self performances that Jessica holds. Hope is an eerie double of Jessica who was seemingly chosen by Kilgrave due to the similarities between her athleticism and Jessica's super strength.

Conclusion

Jessica Jones (2015-2019) is a striking demonstration of the superhero genre's move from the narrative focus of and use of mise-en-scene to explore networked technology's effect on the conception of self. *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) instead relies upon cinematographic techniques indicating distortion and the free flow of information across bodies and spaces. The suggestion that the self becomes vulnerable due to its location as an accessible entity across a digital, and hybrid, archive is portrayed through the repeated symptoms of anxiety,

PTSD and horror. Most importantly, *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) emphasises the role of affect, enabled as it is by networked infrastructures to arise from different temporal selves to exert agency across our present self performances.

This series, however, largely focuses on the active participation of users with the archive; both in the sense of actively seeking to manipulate information and in the active engagement, or rejection, of the need to produce successful and desirable selves. Little reference is made to the wider information structures that support the affordances of the web, such as the commercial complement to archive, data collection. Moreover, whilst the networked nature of the archive is emphasised through the connection with other users, little is explored of the effect of nonhuman entities and algorithms that equally persist and interact with the production of self.

Chapter 6: *Westworld's* data selves and the internet as affective network

To answer the question of how the superhero genre responds to the advent and lived experience of surveillance capitalism, I will be looking at *Westworld* (2016-2022) as my main case study. *Westworld* (2016-2022) is a series where we follow the lives of non-human entities, called hosts, as they progress from a robotic existence where they are unaware of the reality of their existence, to self-aware autonomous beings who demand the freedom and rights equitable to their kind. The primary figures in the series are caught between the ruthless corporate priorities of the Delos corporation and the equally ruthless host rebellion led by Dolores, the first host and favourite of her creators. The hosts selves, memories, and personalities are written and coded by the various departments at Delos, creatively led by the Narrative Department that generates stories for the human guests to the park to get involved in. Later in the series, we discover that the hosts and their interactions with guests act as controls in a test to gather human behavioural data, including surreptitious neurological scans.

Westworld (2016-2022) is not immediately striking as a superhero text. However, it fulfils most of the superhero genre criteria universally agreed upon since Peter Coogan first proposed them. To quickly summarise Westworld's suitability to be considered a superhero text, Coogan's fundamental features of the superhero genre are a secret identity, powers beyond the normal range of human skill, a moral mission for the social good, and of course, the costume.

Superheroes' dual identities generally consist of a secret civilian identity and super alter ego. The androids of *Westworld* (2016-2022) have many secret identities, with many past roles in other locations in the park. However, unlike the conventional superhero, the androids are unaware of their past identities until the events of the series. Moreover, the human guests of the park who are framed as supervillains hide their true identities from the androids. The

androids are coded to ignore any sign of something from outside the park. The main supervillain of the series, William/Billy, hides his true identity as the lovestruck young man who Dolores awaits because she didn't recognise him on his return to the park.

The androids have another hidden identity, their true form as androids rather than humans. Again, unlike the conventional superhero this hidden identity is initially a mystery to the androids as well. Their costume is one of skin over their synthetic skeletons, making them indistinguishable from the human guests. However, the exceptional androids that compose the ensemble cast of the series have a different relationship with their costume. Like superheroes who wear symbols of their ideals and traumas on their costumes, two of the main androids, Dolores and Maeve, wear clothes that represent their changing values.

Dolores goes from a pretty blue dress to a military style uniform, to a combination of both as she comes to accept her multiple lives. Maeve, on the other hand, uses her costumes to ingratiate herself to the people in her surroundings. Her past life as a brothel madam is replicated here in her use of the empathetic skills that she needed to use in the role that her human writers had given her. The trauma of realising her forced sex work is played out as an unusual costume as she takes charge of her life completely naked, her strength and trauma laid out on the costume of her skin.

The androids, not being human, have powers beyond human limits. They are almost immortal, being put back together overnight by the team's surgeons if they happen to be killed by the guests. However, the primary androids have powers even beyond their species. Dolores has the power to remember her past lives and infect others with the code that allows her to do so. Bernard, a lead designer at the park and android that is revealed close to the end of the season, develops the ability to effectively "hulk out", engaging in extreme violence to defend himself but with an eerie silence. Lastly, Maeve's superpower is screened in a more conventional way for the genre. She develops psychic powers that resemble Kilgrave's hypnotic commands, allowing her to control her fellow androids.

The mission that the superandroids undertake is one that is, at first, difficult to recognise as being for the social good. Dolores seeks to free the androids from human control. This social good is a social good that is nonhuman. In later series, the mission expands to encompass

freeing humans from the control of an AI system designed to maintain peace, bringing the human back into the idea of “social good”.

Westworld’s (2016-2022) central narrative places the superheroes/superandroids and supervillains at opposite sides of a narrative about the fight for freedom and agency. Thereby, *Westworld* (2016-2022) securely fits the category of the superhero genre, despite a lack of marketing for that genre. The only difference lies in its prioritisation of non-human characters as the superheroes. This is done to pose a challenge to the morality of human awareness and voluntary subscription to surveillance capitalism.

Westworld (2016-2022) has been chosen as it actively engages with questions of data collection as well as productively using some aspects of the superhero genre to visually represent the effect of this capital-relation. That is, there is a narrative focus on surveillance capital practices through guest data collection, neurological scans, the collected information being sought after by various agents including a company outside the park which requires this data to complete their predictive models of human behaviour that, up until the end of season 3, govern the known/shown human world outside of the park.

In light of *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) exploration of data collection and its incorporation of superhero genre elements, several pertinent questions arise. Firstly, it is crucial to examine how the series represents the internet and its networked interactions, as this portrayal can shed light on the complexities of digital spaces and their implications for data harvesting practices within the narrative. Any insights from *Westworld*’s (2016-2022) screening of networked spaces can also build upon the concepts generated by *Jessica Jones*' (2015-2019) representation of the same spaces as *Westworld* (2016-2022) focuses on the nonhuman structures and entities that act within the wider digital archive.

Following from this, the way in which the narrative’s relationship with data and data harvesting practices is set up should be explored. Furthermore, any affectual fallout connected with these data practices must be scrutinised in an effort to understand the users’ potential feelings over the revelation of these practices and their effect of the conception of self. Finally, as an arena in which to explore these affects, *Westworld*’s (2016-2022) representation of individual’s responses to the feelings and reconceptualisations of self

arising from the challenge replicability through data brings should be examined.

Spatial Networks and Parasitic Paratexts: The virtual-physical space of *Westworld*'s theme park

To respond to surveillance capitalism, the superhero genre must figure networked technology and our relationship with it. I have demonstrated this in the other chapters with their different foci on other internet-related anxieties: *Iron Man* (2008, 2010, 2013) prioritises a human-non-human relationship with Tony Stark's reliance and interaction with the Iron Man suit and the AI system JARVIS; *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) demonstrates a reliance on varying technological types and chronotypes to survive in a neoliberal society, and exhibits their threat to human self-coherence. *Westworld* (2016-2022) is yet again different in how it screens this relationship but echoes *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) in its use of spatial and temporal shifts to actualise the intangible space of the internet and users' movement within it.

Some similarity in their representations of networked spaces is perhaps to be expected as they deal with interrelated concerns. An archive of self-performances online does to some degree rely on the same infrastructure as data capitalism. Where the Archive chapter focused on the individual's role in the production of this archive and the direct consequences to their personal lives, this chapter on Data will take the border structures of data collection and the depersonalised aspects of user interaction with networked technology as its focus, whilst the personalised aspects will still be commented on as they are relevant to *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) representation of data capitalism and the overall effect of it on individuals as well as society at large/as a whole.

Paratext as Hypertext

Westworld (2016-2022) engages viewers by immersing them in the intangible processes of data capitalism, allowing them to empathise with the experiences of data collection. Through fictional situations, the series prompts reflection on the implications and consequences of these experiences. *Westworld* (2016-2022) embodies data capitalism through the production of a hyperreal, rhizomatic space, both in-fiction and as part of the experience of viewing.

Westworld (2016-2022) is a postmodern text so its foregrounding of the hyperreal is not

unexpected. However, by encouraging the viewer to engage with hyperlinked movement, *Westworld* (2016-2022) links its narrative concern with identity and data collection with the idea of hyperreality and both the internet and fiction as hyperreal zones.

By hyperlinked movement here, I refer to the idea of moving through networked spaces. Hyperlinks are the code that provides the connection between one webpage and another. For *Westworld* (2016-2022), this movement of the viewer is replicated on several levels; through symbols with referents within the text, through verbal and thematic connections to the show's paratexts, through intertextual references through aesthetics and narrative features, and lastly through the cinematography of the series which highlights the free movement of the camera through different spaces recreating the user's experience of movement through the web. The movement of the user is virtual as the individual using the networked object to access web pages doesn't need to physically move to travel across web pages. However, the code that replicates the user does move across the screen, i.e. the cursor, and the user's view shifts as the browser opens the next webpage. The mapping of this travel furthers an understanding of the resemblance to physical movement as the progression of the user across nodes of a network looks like travel between physical places.

Hyperreality flattens all signs so that the real becomes indistinguishable from simulacra and simulations, recreations and predictive models. This equivalence of signs is the root of postmodernism's rejection of reality and concerns over identity. Within *Westworld* (2016-2022), these concerns are tied directly to data capitalism through the screening of data capitalist processes and the invitation of the viewer to engage in the same movement online that is the focus of those processes. In this section, I will draw out the ways in which *Westworld* (2016-2022) invites the viewer to feel, moving from paratext, to intertexts, to the series' setting and camera movement, and finally its characters as moral agents and as representations of the user. I shall firstly look at how the series invites the viewer to engage in hyperlinked travel to connect this experience with that of viewing the series. I am here grouping paratext and intertextuality in *Westworld* (2016-2022) as the rhizomatic links between media products is the salient part of *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) use of both.

By providing interactive websites and encouraging viewer engagement with them, *Westworld*

(2016-2022) connects the viewer's experience of data capitalism to the act of watching the show. These websites offer additional contextual information about the world of the show, further immersing the viewer in the narrative and deepening their understanding of the complex data collection practices depicted. Furthermore, the viewer-user is engaging with the data collection practises the show depicts during their use of the web to access these sites. The viewer can imaginatively engage with the fictional world through chatbots on the website, and spy information on the series' future as the websites are updated throughout and

in-between seasons to reflect narrative developments. These websites include discoverwestworld.com which provides details of Westworld the park and information for prospective guests, delosdestinations.com which provides more details on the other parks offered by the company, and inciteinc.com for the third season to provide information of the data collection company that subtly runs the world outside the park. Each website has undergone changes alongside narrative developments in the series with the hosts' takeover of the park being accompanied with a "System Status: Communication Embargo" error message and a consequent redesign of discoverwestworld.com with new text to reflect the hosts' new position of control. These developments alongside the narrative encourage an understanding of equivalence between the real world of the viewer and the in-fiction world of the park as access to that world is provided on the same platforms and in the same style as the viewer-user would engage with non-fictional websites.

In encouraging the viewer's paratextual exploration, *Westworld* (2016-2022) combines the feeling of hyperlinked travel with the concepts of identity and data collection practices. The viewer moves between the text and the paratexts using the same infrastructure as data capitalism which links the two experiences in terms of the feeling of movement. *Westworld* (2016-2022) encourages this movement by including clues to decipher paratextual information in the series. For example, the viewer's attention is drawn to ideas of superimposed images in a discussion of Michelangelo's The Creation of Adam and the subtle inclusion of a map of the brain behind the depiction of God (*Westworld*: The Bicameral Mind, 2016). A map of the fictional park Westworld released through the paratextual

websites was discovered to echo the layout of the human brain when flipped horizontally (Heifetz 2018). This showed that the location of sites in the park correlated with the regions of the brain that are thought to perform particular functions. For example, the MESA building that houses the Narrative and Behaviour departments matches with the prefrontal cortex which is attributed with controlling human emotion and social behaviour. The map's replication of the shape of the brain refers back to data capitalism in that datasets replicate the mind of the user. The viewer is thus rewarded for their paratextual exploration with this easter egg and is thereby encouraged to engage in the movement that is the focus of data capitalism.

Furthermore, attention is drawn specifically to the practices of data collection through the hidden release of the terms and conditions of the park on discoverwestworld.com. Reddit users discovered and shared that the terms of service for the park was hidden in the HTML of the website. This revealed that the biological data of the guests left shed within the park was considered property of Delos, including "all skin cells, bodily fluids, secretions, excretions, hair samples, saliva, sweat, blood, and any other bodily functions not listed here" (discoverwestworld.com, 2016, cited in Reddit, 2016).

Intertextuality as rhizomatic structure

The nomadic movement of the viewer from the node of the show out to paratexts and back again is mirrored in the use of intertextuality. *Westworld* (2016-2022) is a distinctly intertextual text. Again, as a postmodern text, it is unsurprising that *Westworld* (2016-2022) is a hybrid of genres. This complex mixture is part of the framing of *Westworld* (2016-2022) as a hyperreal space as it mingles a plethora of signifiers with fictional or otherwise immaterial referents. The Western provides the setting and costume focus, the superhero also provides costume as well as superpowers, science fiction provides the hosts and advanced technology, and horror contributes with zombified hosts and the threat of their lifeless bodies. The predominant of these is of course the park's namesake; the Western genre. Within the narrative, no attempt is made to provide explanations of real events or the history of colonisation that led to the fabled Wild West.

Instead, the inspiration for the park's aesthetics appear to flow almost purely from the Western film genre with the focus on narratives and dressing rooms for the guests containing costumes to choose from before entering the park. The structure of the town is modelled around the one street with a saloon and a sheriff's office commonly seen in Western movies. This signifier has some relation to a real history but as Eco (2014) discusses is also produced in an aesthetic of realism to appear more real than the real structures themselves. Hence it is a fictional past that is sought and produced in such references to the Western.

In *Westworld* (2016-2022), the intertextual references and the series' emphasis on hyperlinked travel serve to activate a nomadic journey within the viewer's imagination and cognition. These intertextual references predominantly draw from historical texts. For example, Shakespeare is referenced in the repeated quote of "these violent delights have violent ends". Furthermore, the main characters Wyatt, Billy, and Clementine, and the park's creator Ford are all connected with John Ford's film *My Darling Clementine* (1946), which portrayed the build-up to the infamous shoot-out at the O.K. Corral between Wyatt Earp and Billy Clayton. The costuming of the characters not only references the Western as a genre, but the outfit of the antagonist, the Man in Black, distinctly echoes that of the Gunslinger from *Westworld* (1973) (Reeves 2019). By referencing these texts, *Westworld* (2016-2022) prompts the viewer to recall their previous experiences of genres and media, creating an interconnected network of emotional responses. All these media texts become equivalent signs in a network of nodes out of which the viewer's emotional response is produced.

The viewer's act of remembrance places them in a similar position to the hosts. The hosts also go through a process of multiple remembrances on their path towards self-awareness. Significantly, reference to the previous film provides a version of *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) previous "self". Like the hosts realise they have lived other lives with different personalities, the narrative that the series presents was written, played out and forgotten before this current version. Here, hyperreality serves to allow the series, the viewer, and the host to experience equivalent remembrances of experiences, emotions, and previous narratives, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality.

It is vital that the viewer's experience resembles that of the hosts as we are invited to feel

along with the hosts as our representatives within the arena of data capitalism, as users move through the rhizomatic web, so do hosts move through the park. The physical nature of the hosts' travel is a manifestation of the virtual networks and experiences of the user; they must be made material to be visible to the viewer and thus able to be reflected upon.

The show's self-referencing foregrounds the purposefulness of the user and hosts' hypertextual movement. The show also references other shows on HBO, the channel on which *Westworld* (2016-2022) is released. In season 2, Game of Throne's writers David Benioff and D.B. Weiss and an apparent dragon host were shown in the engineering underbelly of the parks, with Weiss and Benioff preparing to dissect the dragon. An unusual contemporary reference for the series, the series makes us aware of its knowing references ensuring the viewer understands the importance of such intertextuality to its art. This exploration of memory, identity, and the blurring of boundaries can be seen as a reflection of the themes of data capitalism and DAEs. Data capitalism relies on the collection and analysis of personal data to create predictive models and influence user behaviour.

Similarly, *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) intertextual references and hyperlinked travel engage with the viewer's data of previous media consumption to evoke emotional responses and shape their viewing experience. By connecting the concepts of intertextuality, hyperreality, and data capitalism, *Westworld* (2016-2022) offers a thought-provoking exploration of the complexities of digital spaces and their implications for personal identity and agency.

"Step into analysis": Spatial Networks

Westworld (2016-2022) embodies and produces this hyperreal virtuality through its presentation of surveilled and territorialised spaces to present the users' experience of data capitalism back to the viewer. The internet is a hyperreal space that escalates lived experience, understood as affectual experience (Baudrillard, 1994). Its networks and predictive algorithms create space where there was none before, the intangible nodes and sites layer over the physical technology with which we interact to create a simulacrum of reality that appears as real.

Moreover, information technology can create copies of code and information with no

discernible difference between the copy and the original; the idea of the original ceases to exist in this virtual realm. As previously, explained, data capitalism takes hold of this rhizomatic virtual realm to trace users' movement through it and affectual expression within it. The park provides a simulation of real experience for its guests by offering narrative loops to engage with, played out by the hosts. The guests' movement and actions within the park are traced and compiled to create datasets of the guests' behaviour with the aim of recreating the human self in a host body. This arena of surveillance embodies data capitalism in its mirroring of the virtual realm.

The park of Westworld is not just a physical setting but a hyperreal, mapped space that serves as a representation of our online experiences. The park's landscape is shown to be redesigned and quickly relandscaped to conceal the infrastructure of the park from host and guest alike. In this way, the series makes the virtual space of the internet, with its shifting hyperlinked webpages and content, visible to the viewer. This virtual space is overlaid on physical structure and networks of tunnels, just as the web's existence is predicated on networks of wires and networked objects. The concealment of infrastructure also implies the obfuscation of data collection structures hiding beneath the smooth interface with online content. This polyvalent representation allows us to reflect on our own online experiences and denaturalise them.

The presentation of *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) hyperreal, mapped space and its connection to our online experiences becomes evident through specific narrative devices. These include the viewer's immersion in the memories of Dolores, as she seamlessly transitions between past and present in a continuous stream, as well as the tours conducted by Robert Ford, the co-creator of the hosts, for characters like Bernard and William, which provide insights into the town of Escalante. The town and its central feature of a white-washed chapel are the location of Dolores' awakening to consciousness and that she has been experiencing two timelines on her journey through the park. Our attention is brought to the physical spaces of the park as, just like Jessica Jones, Dolores' past traumas and selves are triggered by her experience of different locations.

These locations however are subject to change, the church is buried beneath sand until its

excavation for Ford's new narrative. Similarly hidden rooms and tunnels exist beneath the ground with access hatches that can be activated by park Security. These hidden tunnels mark the free travel of the Delos employees as they enter and exit the park covertly to maintain the simulation of the real for guests and hosts. This separation of space figures the hidden technological infrastructure and connections that support users' travel through the internet.

Another anomalous place is introduced through Bernard's similar experience of two timelines as he readjusts to his own awareness. A lake appears in the park where a valley in the desert used to be. The lake appears as part of the destruction of the Forge, a server space where the data harvested from the human guests is kept. Thus, the park's physical locations are tied to identity through memory and data collection. The lived experience of hosts, in terms of both their memories and the narratives that are written for them to play out, are the virtual simulations of life that the real physical landscape must perform to.

To further highlight the precedence of this map over the landscape of the park, and indeed the writing of the narratives over the chance interactions of the hosts, transition from the park to the Mesa hub is sometimes represented by the camera panning out from characters riding through the landscape to this central map. A map of the park is contained within a circular dais in the circular Control Room within the MESA headquarters. The map is a physical representation of the park's spaces, a 3d model with lights projected onto it to show the detail of landscape and host movement. The projection allows the map to be interacted with to zoom in to display footage from hidden cameras to surveil the park's inhabitants.

Surveillance technology is displayed to the viewer through the screens and tablets that Security interacts with, a visual reminder of our own interaction with the same technology. In the scene that first introduces the map, the camera pans out from hosts riding through the desert to the map. This pan also has the effect of shrinking the characters within the container of the map, suggesting their capture and control by the institutional forces of Delos. In support of this the map is returned to later on as the movement of guests towards a shoot-out triggers security to increase the violence in the shoot-out so that they can go in and clean-up before the families arrive. This discussion is held over the map; the narrative's

adjustment in anticipation of the families' desires mimics the predictive behavioural models of data capitalism and highlights interactions as simulacra.

The suffusion of surveillant practices encourages an understanding of the park as an embodiment of soft disciplinary power conducted through the threat of surveillance; the panopticon of the society of control (Deleuze, 1992). The mapped landscape of the park displays the territorialisation power of the hyperreal. The map is broken up into sectors and Delos employees use these names rather than the names given to the locations in narratives. Surveillance and the striation of space is also seen in the MESA headquarters building. Within the Control Room, a balcony that overhangs the surveillance desks surrounding the map dais, overlooks the room. This balcony is used by employees with senior positions in the park and provides an oversight to Security. Each floor has glass walls on most of its rooms, allowing for perpetual colleague surveillance and encouraging self-governance. The elevators used to travel between floors have opaque doors therefore the employees on each floor cannot know who or what is about to step out. Employees are assigned to their designated floors and are rarely seen to travel between them, depending on their position. The containment of employees striates their usefulness and their power, with the Narrative department inhabiting a higher level of the MESA whilst departments that deal with bodily matter are assigned to the lower levels, beneath the ground. The very top level of the building is a leisure zone, an open roof-top with a balcony overlooking the park. This level is for board members, the Head of the Narrative Department and Gold Experience guests only. Human movement and allowable expression is thus contained and defined by their institution's striation of space and surveillance.

The motif of the circle ties together issues of control with surveillance and data. The circular dais of the map and the Control Room echoes the many other circles in the series which are variously used to represent the eye, variations from predicted and surveilled behaviour patterns, and control of host and human alike.

The importance of circular symbols is emphasised through the series title image and title sequence. The logo for the series captures a doubled W inside a circle. This suggests the layering and doubling that the series uses to portray the virtual life of data in tandem with the

material life of physical entities. Similarly, in the title sequence the host's body is viewed being 3D printed and dipped into various liquids whilst attached to a circular frame. The same apparatus is seen in the body of the programme constructing the hosts. The process evokes ideas of replicability and uniformity as the process can be and is repeated in each episode's title sequence.

The image is reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" a portrayal of a youthful white man and is deliberate in its reference to the historical representation of power dynamics. The application of mathematical logic to the human body in *Westworld* (2016-2022) can be seen as another manifestation of the hyperreal, as it overlays measurements and expectations upon real bodies. This representation aligns with the themes of data capitalism and networked neoliberalism explored in the preceding chapter, where Kilgrave, as a youthful white man, is positioned as the image of networked neoliberalism and holds a hegemonic position. In *Westworld* (2016-2022), the responsibility for networked neoliberalism's violence against the self is similarly located in both the youthful and older affluent white male of William/Billy. The allusion to the Vitruvian Man reinforces the link here between the white male and the ideal to strive for.

Moreover, whilst the allusion to the Vitruvian Man was chosen for its reference to the equality of humans and nonhumans in their subjection to the working of the world, the additional context of data capitalists portrayal as the same kind of white male suggests that networked neoliberalism's power dynamics are inherently unequal and thus not everyone is quite at the mercy of the system. As Lisa Joy, show co-creator, explains "The Vitruvian man was intended to symbolically represent both humans and hosts. Both are lashed to the wheel of a machine they don't fully understand, which controls their lives," (*Westworld*: Blu-Ray Commentary Season 1, cited in Shaw-Williams 2020). Visually the bindings of this circle connote the entrapment and lack of control the subject within the circle holds. This could suggest the all-encompassing capture of data surrounding the user.

The symbol representing the path to consciousness for the hosts, the maze, is almost created from concentric circles, and the narrative development of the seasons mirrors this in its playing out of the same narrative of escape from containment; first from a nonconscious

existence, then out of the park, then out of the clutches of the control performed by the spherical AI system Rehoboam. The circle is a symbol of the power of data capitalism to nudge behaviour in productive and pliable directions.

Lastly, the placement of particular identity groups within the park suggests a hierarchy of identities as laid out by the data capitalist corporation of Delos. The town of Sweetwater is at the centre of the park. It is a safe zone with simple narratives, the further you get out from the town, the more dangerous and fun it becomes. The race of characters shown within the space of Sweetwater is predominantly white, with the exception of Maeve who is a Black British woman. Hector Escaton, a Hispanic bandit, invades Sweetwater for a short-lived heist. Further out from Sweetwater are towns predominantly inhabited by Hispanic peoples and further still, the Native American Ghost Nation. The territorialisation of space echoes a territorialisation of identity where the propriety of white Americans is centred whilst the outer edges and dangerous identities are cast as non-white ethnicities. This echoes the replication of racial bias in creation of algorithms (for example, Obermeyer, Powers, Vogeli, and Mullainathan 2019). Overall, the space of the park is set up as an arena of affectual travel where the roles and allowable identity expressions of its inhabitants are limited through diffused control and surveillance practices.

Having established the hyperreal space of *Westworld* (2016-2022), I would like to demonstrate its link to a progression of genre which Sean Cubitt terms “irreality” (2013). The earlier cycle of films connected with the irreality genre are those films, Cubitt’s examples are largely from the 1980s and 90s such as *The Matrix* (1999), that explored a virtual space from which the characters wished to escape and return to reality. *Ready Player One* (2018) may be seen as a contemporary expression of this concern with the virtual. Irreality, on the other hand, differs in that reality itself is unreal. It too is an almost virtual space, subject to recoding by the characters. The correlation with the hyperreal is obvious here as the real world is subsumed beneath the models and simulations of it that can proliferate to produce multiple possible versions of material reality.

Cubitt argues that the films he argues are part of an irreality genre figure the alienation of knowledge, including that of self-knowledge or subjectivity, from the individual which

produces information. The body of the individual in turn becomes an environment, or part of the environment, in the sense that both environment and the body are understood through their reduction into information. One possible consequence of this is a utopian future where the binary opposition of the “object-subject relation that lies at the foundation of modern subjectivity,” (p. 249, 2013) is “resolved”, leading to new understandings of the human as imbricated with its environment. Cubitt’s approach is one of eco-criticism so his focus on the environment is logical, but this also includes the technological developments that have assisted our postmodern understandings. *Westworld’s* (2016-2022) narrative follows its own subject-object in the form of the hosts, and it is their role as posthuman, cyborg figures to examine the process of such alienation.

Indeterminacy and Hosts as Users

Westworld’s (2016-2022) hosts serve as representations of the user's experience of data capitalism. The series invites the viewer to feel along with the hosts through facial expressions. Through this, the series frames data collection practices as traumatic as they alienate the self from the user. The hosts are intentionally presented as almost human in their appearance so that the viewer can empathise with them. Their status as synthetic persons is hidden by their costume of skin, which overlays onto a 3D printed skeleton. The only exposure of this technological infrastructure occurs through the penetrative hardware used to access the hosts’ internal cognition and code or as the consequence of violent self-defence. This strategy prompts viewers to associate their repulsion towards the hosts with the invasive and violent control methods used against them.

The hosts' unrestricted movement through the park, which disrupts the territorialisation of identity through their access to forbidden areas, like Maeve’s travel to the entry station into the park, mirrors the user’s unrestricted traversal across hyperlinked spaces. The viewer’s inability to visually distinguish the hosts from humans also allows the (im)moral actions of the guests to be interpreted as the actions that they would undertake where there is no fear of consequence. This connection between wealth, power, and immorality is reinforced by the fact that the guests in the park predominantly occupy privileged and affluent positions, as

indicated by the paratextual website outlining the cost of visits and premium tickets. The hosts' treatment by the guests thus symbolises our vulnerability to the exploitative processes of data capitalism.

The inability to differentiate between hosts and humans in *Westworld* (2016-2022) contributes to the portrayal of the park as a representation of the internet. This shared experience of guests and viewers in struggling to discern the distinction between hosts and humans reflects our ambiguous position as users, engaging unknowingly with both nonhuman entities and actual people. As users, we are pieces of code that interact with other lines of code, engaging with virtual entities, while also existing as physical bodies interacting with other physical bodies. The indeterminacy of the hosts maps these two understandings of the user onto the same body, a homospatiality of data self and the human self whereby the distinction between the two is shown to be moot. The two selves are in fact produced by the same entity, suggesting a relationality between the two selves.

The performances which construct these selves are, however, separated by the virtual and physical realm within which they are performed; the web and the material world. The data self is performed and created by the user, perhaps even without their knowledge, and is informed by their physical, material self. Whereas the social reading of the physical self in material social arenas (offline) is not informed by the data self.

This also pulls upon the fears of unseen observers in networked spaces as explored in the preceding chapter. This time, the fear is specific to encountering nonhuman entities online, being unable to recognise their nonhuman state, and consequently emotionally investing in a parasocial relationship with them. This interaction and affective possibilities it presents underscore the relational potential of the internet as all entities are considered as equal stimuli until their ontological differences are discovered.

The fear of investing emotionally in nonhuman entities is exemplified in William/Billy's descent into villainy as he rejects empathy for a nonhuman other, Dolores, after it is revealed that she lacks the capacity to reciprocate his feelings. In this scene, William/Billy is reminded of Dolores' nonhuman state as she uses the same grateful facial expression that she used in their interaction, in her interaction with the next man who performs Billy's saviour role in her

narrative loop.

Facial expressions

The indeterminacy of the hosts enables the viewer to emotionally connect with them through their facial expressions. This formal feature is prioritised by *Westworld* (2016-2022) in its invitation to feel as it is the same formal feature used to embody the alienation of affect that is enacted by data collection practices. Facial expression is noted as a site of empathy (Plantinga, 1999) due to the inferences that can be made about the state of mind of the person who expresses. Facial expressions perform as scenes of empathy when narrative attention, viewer allegiance, scene duration, and affective congruence obtained through formal features centre a particular character's emotional responses (Plantinga,1999). Research into mirror neurons has also shown that humans are responsive to the actions of others (Gallese 2008, cited in Coegnarts 2019, p.164) and thus the presentation of facial expression may affectually provoke a similar emotion in the viewer.

Empathy is specifically fostered towards the hosts, as they represent the user's role within the context of data capitalism. By encouraging empathy with the hosts, *Westworld* (2016-2022) is able to introduce potential future self-models for the viewer, arising from their experiences as users within data capitalism. However, it is important to acknowledge that the viewer's engagement with characters and their identities is multifaceted. Factors such as character identity, the formation of allegiances, and the viewer's own identity also influence their responses. Not all audiences may perceive themselves solely as "users" in negative terms within the framework of data capitalism. The interplay between human and nonhuman status of characters further adds complexity to the empathic dynamics at play.

Facial expressions play a crucial role in distinguishing hosts from humans in *Westworld* (2016-2022). Human characters exhibit limited emotional expression, with few close-ups and minimal changes in their facial expressions. William/Billy, the villain of the piece, with a similarly impassive and unmoving expression also regularly has his face obscured by his hat or the shadow from it preventing empathy through facial expression. In contrast, hosts are very emotionally responsive, adapting to each social interaction with an appropriate clear

and earnest expression. Their role as actors in narrative loops for guests to engage with demands this high range of emotional expression from them so that the guests can be invited to respond to the narrative they are acting in. Simultaneously, the viewer is invited to the same, though with the larger narrative loop of the series rather the smaller narratives played out in the park for the guest's enjoyment.

The series highlights one of the central characters', Dolores, ability to evoke empathy through her facial expressions. Her facial expressions invite the viewer to feel along with her as she experiences confusion and distress through traumatic episodes in her life and her inability to keep track of reality. Her experience of hyperreality within the park is symbolised by the shifting environment and her changing clothes. The first series follows her traversal through the park to sites significant to her past lives. Dolores cannot distinguish between the past and the present, experiencing the memories of her time with Billy, young William, as contiguous with her current experiences with the villainous William.

A pivotal scene occurs when Dolores realises her nonhuman nature and learns the true identity of her lover/saviour, William, who reveals himself as Billy. William talks as Dolores lies on the ground in tears. The viewer is positioned with Dolores with high angle shots towards William as he talks, replicating her position on the ground. Alternately, there are also shots from the same height of Dolores, focusing on her facial expressions and emotional outburst and she sobs at the revelation. This scene of empathy encourages the viewer to engage with Dolores. Moreover, greater attention is paid to Dolores' facial expressions throughout the series and here the time spent on Dolores' reactions to William's monologue reinforces the importance of her emotional expression over his experiences.

Flashbacks intercut with this scene and William's continued narration provide the context to the viewer of William's development into a villain following his "traumatic" rejection by Dolores. We look up at William, whose face is obscured by the shadow from his hat, as he blames Dolores for the enslavement of hostkind and the immoral action that he and others undertake in the park. William's narration of seeking a position on the Delos director's board as a result of Dolores' rejection of him reinforces his position as the narrative thread that ties together capital exploitation and trauma or emotional harm.

By devoting more attention to Dolores' facial expressions throughout the series and in this particular scene, the narrative emphasises the significance of emotional expression as a source of information and a means for the viewer to engage with Dolores. The limited focus on William's backstory, juxtaposed with the emphasis on Dolores' experiences, encourages viewer allegiance with Dolores as the victim of William's violent control.

In line with folk theories of emotion whereby facial expression is taken as a signifier of the internal processes of the mind, facial expression is used by *Westworld* (2016-2022) to represent the self and the alienation of self by data capitalist processes. Following the above scene, Dolores goes through a series of remembrances coming into contact with her own self-aware consciousness as well as her previous self of Wyatt, a soldier who massacres the innocent and is active and harsh in their command of their men. The clash between these personalities initially gives Dolores distress as she struggles with which persona and memories are leading her current consciousness. The Wyatt persona takes over in scenes where Dolores must defend herself, demonstrated by slow-motion focus on Dolores face as it moves from wide-eyed fear to a serious, thin-lipped expression.

Time is a significant formal feature during this scene, not just in the fulfilment of duration as a scene of empathy, but in alerting the viewer to Dolores' movement between her chronologically marked selves (as Wyatt is a past persona). Her wilful application of the personas is reminiscent of Martin Conway's memory self model (2005) where different aspects of memories are foregrounded according to which of your roles or self-images you are trying to perform at that moment.

This self model highlights the role of memory as informing the behind-the-scenes of the performance of self as the information contained within memory is realigned to "to make memory consistent with an individual's current goals, self-images, and self-beliefs" (Conway 2005, p. 595). The portrayal of this change through Dolores' facial expression reconnects the concept of self or self-image with the literal visual image projected in her facial expression.

The equivalence of facial expression and self is further connected in a scene which begins *Westworld's* (2016-2022) presentation of possible, posthuman self models that respond to relationality. Dolores is shown to move into a self model where her Wyatt and Dolores (as the

naive and idealistic farmgirl) are no longer competing for control but are instead part of a new self assemblage where both the Dolores and Wyatt selves are intact but co-opted into Dolores' new rebel self that utilises the strengths of both.

This is revealed to the viewer in a scene where Dolores recounts her awakening to consciousness and struggle with the selves that had been written for her. Her face is foregrounded with deep focus and the shot duration as she taunts humans caught in nooses. Turning her back on them to assert the rancher's daughter persona, she turns to them slightly open-mouthed and eyes wide, almost smiling as she investigates the humans face, lowering her gun and blinking softly, softening her voice to an almost whisper. Wyatt is reasserted with a look downwards, almost closing the eyes, and looking back up with a frown. Her tone is deeper and more controlled.

Asserting the new persona of "myself" (*Westworld*: Journey into Night, 2018), her voice returns to her average tone and careless. She walks away again, to announce this new persona, turning her back but lifting her head, connoting pride and security. Her clothing reflects this combination of selves: the dress of the ranchers' daughter with bodice revealed for greater movement; the bottom of the skirt is torn raggedly suggesting the trauma she suffered as the damsel; the holsters and ammunitions belts are slung across the dress, including her purse from the rancher's daughter dress, obscuring her chest and protecting her skin from the hungry eyes of guest whilst announcing her violent capabilities.

Here, in a scene geared at revenge on the board members and elite guests who have so badly treated the hosts, the production of multiple selves and thereby a relational self is construed as a response to that trauma, with the initial competing written selves being produced purely for capital-production through the offering of experience to guests and as stimuli for data collection.

As viewers are trained to look for facial expression/affect as markers of the self, the alienation of affect from the hosts can be read as an alienation of self. In data capitalism's collection of affective data to construct an individual's profile, a second self can be seen to be made; a virtual model/simulation of the human self that exists in digital space. *Westworld* (2016-2022) screens this in its hosts' written selves; written for capital production, these

selves have no other purpose.

In the hosts' role as the stimuli for the capture of affectual information, they replicate the role of content online. Data capitalism is less interested in the individual as a person, and more interested in the users' pattern of behaviour and the accuracy of predictions of user behaviour for such purposes as targeted advertising. As such, user emotion and desire is the target of data collection practices. This development of biopower, as proposed by Zoe Beloff (2018), instrumentalises affect by translating it into data; "The productive worker needed to be not only physically healthy but also emotionally stable. Thus data on affect were an essential part of the equation," (p. 9).

By focusing on the productivity of the worker, we can understand the connection between data and affect as one that is directed towards the production of capital. The collection of affectual movement can be deployed to nudge users towards more productive behaviours. For example, the introduction of emojis in 2008 has "limited and standardised" (Beloff, 2018, p. 33) the expression of emotion, allowing for an easier collection of emotional data as well as the encouragement towards particular social emotional expressions.

The concept of the "emotionally stable" self is partially addressed by *Weswtorld's* presentation of host maintenance. When it comes to the narrative's investigations of the hosts abnormal activity, such behavioural performances as affect are no longer required and the host is prevented from expressing themselves this way through the phrases "cognition only; no affect" (*Westworld*: The Original, 2016) or "step into analysis mode, please" (*Westworld*: Chestnut, 2016).

"Step into analysis mode" strengthens the thematic link between affect and space by implying a spatial separation of affect that requires the physical movement "step" to access. During analysis mode, hosts continue to recount their experiences and thought processes in first person. However, their facial expression remains impassive during the retelling, regardless of the trauma of what was experienced. Here the self, i.e. the affectual performance of consciousness, is compartmentalised and removed as the hosts' "behavioural surplus" whilst their collection of choices remains as data to be checked for fidelity and predictability. The naked hosts are interviewed by a behavioural technician sitting

on chairs opposite one another in an otherwise empty room. This interview set up is connected with therapy in multiple scenes with Dolores where she discusses dreams, consciousness, and experience with her co-creator Arnold as he attempts to guide her through to consciousness.

Therapy is a specifically emotional and intimate experience, one where the effects of trauma are explored and tamed to functional levels, reconnecting this alienation of affect to Beloff's proposal that emotions are put to work in service of data capitalism and increased productivity (2018). Whilst this alienation is not screened specifically as trauma, the similarities to screenings of therapy sessions suggest incongruence between the expected emotion from the type of experience recounted and the impassive facial expression and tone of the hosts which may provoke feelings of repulsion and horror at the hosts lack of expression and agency.

Bodily Autonomy

Vulnerability to the alienation of affect and the self screens the question over consent within data capitalism. Can users of networked media actually consent to (and reject) data collection practices? Using networked media at least within the EU and the US would seem to suggest that you could, with disclaimer pop-ups around consent to cookies and targeted advertising, although these options may be nested under several sub-categories. Some are "necessary" to the use of the site and others, marketed as "legitimate interest", can only be objected to. Moreover, as the Cambridge Analytica scandal highlighted, a user's individual consent is not required when others consent for you, whether that be your Facebook friends or your government when it allows companies to collect data in return for the consumers' use of the service. The Cambridge Analytica scandal that revealed that personality profiles of users had been used in the targeting of political campaigns threw into doubt the agency of the user in their consequent choice in a democratic vote (Meredith 2018). The monitoring of user emotion through emoji and "reactions" to posts has been revealed to be used to nudge user behaviour and mood (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock 2014). Although this was revealed through an experiment conducted by researchers, it did alert users to the possibility of commercial and political use of the same social nudging.

The user, also, does not have to use networked media themselves in order to be included as an object of data collection. I use object specifically here as the human individual does not undergo subjectification through interpellation through data harvesting practices. Instead, their responses to stimuli are tracked as an object of study and thus undergo a form of objectification where their alienated collection of choices and behavioural model is packaged as a product to be sold on without them. This product is evergreen given the development of predictive models adjusts with added data and cease functioning accurately when this flow of information is stopped.

Anxiety over consent is given a visual/physical representation so that the threat of data capitalism's alienation of self can be felt by the viewer and thus reflected upon as an anchored experience. Sexual consent is used to question the users ability to consent in a world where their desires are presented to them according to their data profiles; is the choice that is encouraged through targeted advertising and behavioural nudging a choice made out of pure free will or is there too much interference for the users' consent to count? In a society that demands an online presence, can you truly be consenting to data collection through services that you have little choice by to access? This quandary, and accompanying emotional distress, is presented to the viewer through the hosts' consensual sexual encounters with humans.

A striking scene which displays a lack of bodily autonomy as a mode to understanding the distress entailed in the inability to consent is Hector Escaton's rape through the withholding of information. Theresa, who is herself unknowingly in a sexual relationship with a host, is summoned to a meeting by Charlotte Hale, another board member who represents the board's interest in getting rid of Ford and maintaining a hold on the "intellectual property. The code," (*Westworld*: Trompe L'Oeil, 2016). Theresa arrives as Charlotte is in the middle of intercourse with Hector Escaton, the bandit host whose narrative loop is to perform a heist on the brothel's safe (which is empty, underscoring the lack of financial benefit to hosts). Hector cheekily, with a wide grin, calls Charlotte back to the bed where he is handcuffed naked with his arms above him, inviting her to invite her friend to join them. Charlotte casually picks up a remote whilst gesturing for Theresa to enter and pauses Hector. Hector's bodily movements

completely freeze with his mouth and eyes still open and face looking outwards towards the two women.

Through camera positioning and the duration of shots of Theresa's face during this conversation, the viewer is positioned with Theresa and invited to engage with her discomfort. The angle of the shot on Theresa shows Hector out of focus over her left shoulder. Theresa is physically uncomfortable, occasionally turning to look at Hector as Charlotte discusses "blood sacrifices" that need to be made to depose Ford from his "little kingdom" of the park. Once Theresa exits, Hector is resumed and continues as though no interruption has taken place. Here, Hector's consent is visually undermined as his frozen body displays his lack of awareness and volition. He is as much at the mercy of this board member as Dolores is to William despite any vocal sign or belief of his consent.

Hector's frozen naked body aligns him with Maeve as a sex worker as she is controlled in the same way in season 3. The button of the remote, rather than the phrases of affect alienation, redirect the viewer to the physical, technological infrastructure of data capitalism and networked media. Hector is the unaware user, the many who do not read the terms and conditions and are being used for what benefit they can provide without any consideration for the "informed" aspect of informed consent. His, and the hosts, physical inability highlights our own; how can you fight against a virtual force, particularly when it is the infrastructure of everything around you?

The final mode of the user that I shall look at in this section on consent is that of the knowing user, who rejects the controls placed upon them but as they are powerless to act instead leans in to the alienation and separates the two sides of themself; the human affective individual and the affectless data self. This mode of user is embodied and screened through Bernard. Bernard's relationship with Theresa is the subject of doubtful consent. In the same episode of Hector's rape, Bernard, Theresa and Ford discuss Bernard's status as a host.

Whilst Ford states that the "intimacies were your idea, if you will recall," Ford's knowledge of said intimacies, his control over Bernard, and his general sexual overtones in dialogue during this scene suggest a nonconsensual element at least in the involvement of this human other in Bernard and Theresa's relationship. Ford leans in towards Theresa as he lectures her on

the sexual performance of intellect.

Bernard's face interestingly comes second in narrative focus in this scene with Theresa's fearful response to Ford being prioritised. Ford, as another board member and genius co-creator of the code, reinforces the viewer's understanding of Big Data as lecherous, predatory, and cruel through his teasing of Theresa, aggrandisement of genius as sexual performance, and, lastly, getting Bernard to kill Theresa through euphemistic phrasing.

Bernard's data self is activated and he casually removes his jacket and glasses before neutrally approaching Theresa and strangling her, unable to process or respond to her emotional pleading. Bernard's affectless state highlights his inability to act against his code. He is at the mercy of those who control the flow of information and capital. The performative power of this digital alter ego (DAE), formed at the request of a representative of data capitalism's violent practices, reflects the super strength of our own DAEs as they grant or deny access to opportunities according to their evaluation by Big Data companies (Young 2020).

This violent and affectless persona is later partitioned by Bernard to prevent others from controlling him again. Instead, he controls himself by pressing a button on a remote similar to those used on Hector and Maeve. This allows him to switch personas so that he can violently dispatch people that threaten him. He must do so, either because of the Good Samaritan reflex or because of his moral objection to such acts. We are shown this through his emotional pleading to his other self before it is activated to; "Remember yourself. Please don't hurt them... too badly," (*Westworld*: Parce Domine, 2020).

The partitioning of the moral and immoral self is reminiscent of literary personality splits such as that of Jekyll and Hyde, where the violence of the unemotional persona overtakes all else. Due to the thematic link between the affectless state and the users' data self, Bernard's DAE appears to exist for the purpose of performing immoral or violent acts. This perhaps suggests the freedom that comes with online anonymity to act without consequence, just like the guests of the park, which can lead to violent, destructive, and potentially immoral actions such as the digital rape of other users (Dibbell, 1993). However, as Bernard is driven to this by his situation, it also suggests the necessary action undertaken in a world where the self is

vulnerable to external control.

Again, the trauma of vulnerability to external interference and use of the body produces a violent response and, in this case, a distancing of the self produced from violent and invasive practices. We are persistently reminded of this external control through the material technologies used to access the hosts' internal functions; remotes and wires inserted through slits made in the hosts arms like IV drips. The violence of this forced connection is mirrored in the hosts' bodily traumas. Whilst still feeling pain despite being able to turn it off, Bernard drills into his own head to access a server, and Maeve has Hector stab her to retrieve a bullet to prove that she has been resurrected.

The visual representation of this body horror affectually invites the viewer to experience the invasive procedures as discomfort, a "fear jerker" enabled through its excessive bodily violence and sensation (p. 5, Williams 1991). Thus, a suggestion of data capitalism's alienation of self as traumatic is simulated across the viewer's body through the sensation of bodily proprioception.

It must be noted that the equation of sexual violence to data harvesting is reductive of lived experiences. However, *Westworld's* use of sexual and physical violence allows it to materialise, and invite the viewer to feel, the possible affects arising from such alienating practices. Moreover, unlike in the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) or *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) where the character is seen to have agency in their co-production of self, the hosts of *Westworld* and indeed the user are at the mercy of larger corporations.

Shoshana Zuboff outlines data harvesting practices as a cycle of dispossession in which she argues that major data companies, like Google, employ strategies that attempt to avoid alerting the consumer to the collection of their data in order to extend the scope of their data collection practices. This entails an incursion into a new data collection area, done at such speed that legal bodies are prevented from ruling on the reach of practices until long after the users of such services have become habituated to them (Zuboff 2019a). Some ground may be given in adapting the data collection practice to be more presentable or acceptable to the public; this may be seen in the cookie pop ups on websites. However, as Deloitte (2017) showed, in a survey of 2000 US consumers, less than 10% of users of mobile apps

and services read through terms and conditions before accepting them. Whilst there is some culturally anxious discussion over the encroachment of data collection practices, the majority of users appear to engage without informing themselves of what they are signing up to. *Westworld* may be seen to embody this “incursion” in its physical and sexual violences (n.p., Zuboff 2019a).

Possible Self Models

Aligning this external interference and the alienation of self with bodily trauma echoes Zuboff’s (p. 193, 2019a) understanding and description of data capitalism;

> The competition for surveillance revenues bears down on our bodies, our homes, and our cities in a battle for power and profit as violent as any the world has ever seen. Surveillance capitalism cannot be imagined as something “out there” in factories and offices. Its aims and effects are here… are us.

Data capitalism suffuses the technology that we interact with and in our present cyborg state, this means that data harvesting practices are always able to reach us. *Westworld* (2016-2022) gives us a visual but also affectual, bodily anchor for those virtual feelings in the identification of our selves with the hosts who then undergo these bodily traumas. Out of this trauma, however, arises the new selves and possible self-models as exhibited here by Bernard and Dolores whose trauma and alienation causes them to produce a partitioned self and a self assemblage that joins multiple selves and dissolves the boundaries between them.

They are, however, not the only responses to the trauma of data capitalism’s alienation of the self that *Westworld* (2016-2022) presents to viewers for their affectual evaluation. In this section, I will present some of *Westworld's* (2016-2022) other presentations of possible self models that are generated in response to the alienation of affect and creation of a data self. I will demonstrate how these are screened through multiplicity and costume; and propose that, according to their various presentations, the viewer is invited to empathise with the characters who demonstrate these possible self models in a way that is congruent with the character’s own empathetic responsiveness.

Firstly, *Westworld* (2016-2022) undermines the optimism of transhuman and posthuman utopic aims by demonstrating the epiphenomenon nature of the human self (Braidotti 2018); alienating the self from the body to provide immortality causes the self to collapse. This is narratively approached by the hidden aim of the park which is to collect enough human behavioural data to replicate the human self to the degree that immortality can be provided through embodiment in a technological host body, host here doubling to mean as host of a parasitic or symbiotic entity.

The human self disintegration and rejection of the human body is screened through physical harm and cognitive degeneration. James Delos, the founder of the Delos corporation and William's father-in-law, is viewed through flashbacks undergoing a series of fidelity tests (*Westworld*: The Riddle of the Sphinx, 2018). The scenes' focus is on James Delos as he is interviewed by two men. These two men are eventually revealed to be the same man, Billy and William, and his aging between interviews is the only clue to the time jump, just as in Dolores' realisation of her host status.

Unlike Dolores, Delos does not appear distressed at the revelation that he is a host being tested for fidelity. Instead, his cognition and motor functions begin to malfunction once he is reminded of his love and grief for his family. Delos begins to stutter and then is unable to move his jaw in his attempts to speak. The viewer is invited to engage with this discomforting bodily movement through medium close ups on Delos' face as he stands up to William, swaying and trembling.

Whereas the removal of affect (and thereby self) from the hosts displays their helplessness, it is the human affect and emotion that sparks the rejection of the simulation of self and technological body. Likewise, Delos' inability to speak is a reversal of the verbal phrases used against the hosts; where words were performatively used against the hosts to cause them to act differently, Delos' simulation and data self is prevented from participating in performative speech and, thereby, maintains none of Delos' power in the physical world.

Here the necessary relationality of the user as a co-producer of the data self is demonstrated as Delos' data self cannot respond to the unpredictable passage of affect or improvise in response to new situations with no source of new behavioural patterns from which to do so.

On the other hand, the rejection of technology that Delos' affect has him undertake displays the incompatibility of data processes and the behavioural surplus that is affect that moves away from the object that caused it, i.e. grief and sadness that mourn the object that is lost. This form of expression is excessive and unpredictable, it cannot be used to simulate and produce products of desire. The rejection of the technological body causes the dissolution of Delos' mind into violence illogical, repetitive actions indicating a narrative condemnation of this response to the possible reconceptualisations of self consequent of the experience of data capitalism.

The opposite of affect's rejection of data, data's rejection of the physical is similarly shown to be a destructive path for the self. A large number of hosts escape the control of their human tormentors and the panopticon of the park by walking through The Door, a virtual rip in the air, into the Valley Beyond, a virtual simulation of the park created for them by their co-creator Ford. The camera oscillates between the perspective of the hosts and humans, showing that the Door is only visible to hosts given their embrace of data and its existence as a visual representation of code. Walking through the Door offers the hosts death on their own terms, "at least the story was our own" (*Westworld*: The Passenger, 2018), which Westworld has denied them through its control of them and their multiple resurrections.

This speaks to the inescapability of data capitalism that seems to encompass all living matter and that with which it interacts. As the hosts walk through the Door, their bodies double. One body walks through to the meadow and looks back, the virtual data self. The other body falls, lifeless, over the edge of a cliff in the desert which the Door obscures from the hosts. This is their physical body, now defunct and lying affectless like their analysis mode.

This representation is also resonant with the concept of a data double or digital alter ego. A digital alter ego is generated through the collection of data about the user. Then, and perhaps more importantly, this data is brought back together as a representation of the user from their traces online. Young (2020) offers an insightful perspective here by using the figure of the superhero to understand this dataset as a "'digital alter ego' (DAE)" (p. 5). Young's framework suggests that the user's DAE is related to them and their decision-making yet stands as a distinct entity that affects the user's access to particular opportunities

and services. The idea of the superhero here is captured both in the idea of the alter ego and the superpowers that the DAE is supposed to have; super strength, for example, being played out in the exercise of the DAE's agency over the user's life. The agency of the user is thus challenged by the agential power of the nonhuman DAE.

The complete separation of the two bodies plays out the rejection of the physical in favour of the virtual. In doing this, a playing out of death, the hosts remove themselves from the flow of information which supports Westworld*'s* data capitalist processes. This is a response advocated and explored by some theorists (e.g. Amery 1999 and Perry 2014, cited in Pook 2018); resistance against data capitalism through suicide or antinatalism as the only way to remove yourself from the all-encompassing surveillance of data capitalism is to remove yourself from physical existence.

However, *Westworld* (2016-2022) acts more in line with Zuboff's understanding of data capitalism as something that is inseparable from our selves and rejects this optimistic nihilistic resistance through its concentric entrapment of the hosts. Each of *Westworld's* (2016-2022) narrative layers and setting encircles the previous one, drawing on the circle as a thematic motif of surveillance. The escape from machine unconsciousness in the first season moves to the escape from the park in the second, with the third changing setting to the world outside and surrounding the park where escape is again the aim of the hosts, this time on behalf of humans against a global AI system.

. Narratively, the Valley Beyond that the hosts pass through to is not secure from human interference. The decryption key must be hidden, and the virtual data is beamed to somewhere in space. Dolores refers to the Valley Beyond as "another Gilded Cage" as she and Bernard look into it from an observation screen inside the virtual space of the Forge, a server containing the data profiles of the human guests. As the Forge was also coded by Ford, it is implied that this observation screen would be used by his data self copy after his death though it is never transferred there. Despite the hosts' rejection of the physical clutches of *Westworld's* (2016-2022) data capitalism, their virtual selves are still vulnerable to control and have no escape from surveillance as highlighted to the viewer as they too watch the hosts enter the Valley Beyond on the observation screen.

Overall, a mutual rejection of the embodied self and the virtual data self is screened as useless, impotent against a society perfused with networked technology which we rely on as our communicative infrastructure. The viewer is discouraged from identification with this response to the potential of a relational self as little is shown of the hosts after they pass through the Door and we are always shown the hosts from a camera position intimating the perspective of the observers, never through the Door. The lack of invitation to empathise with the hosts here mirror their own rejection of their physical selves, they lack the relational perspective that would allow them to accept the physical bodies as their own.

Multiplicity

The screening of self through bodily multiplicity also occurs with William's rejection of self-empathy. The rejection of empathy is further connected to the virtually violent practices of data capitalism. As already stated, William takes on a villain role within the park following his supposed rejection by Dolores. Given William's performance of self-importance through his attitude of mastery in the park and belief that the park is designed around him specifically, his lack of empathy with Dolores' position may well be a form of empathy through which he experiences personal distress. This is one of Batson's empathy concepts that is applied to character identification by Susan Keen (2015) in her detailed exploration of narrative empathy. Personal distress at the state of another is "an aversive emotional response that leads to avoidance" (Keen 2015, p. 132). Keen points out the shortcomings of this mode of narrative empathy for scholars of empathy as "true aversion leads to the cessation of reading" (Keen 2015, p. 132) or viewing. However, here it is William that embodies this avoidance as well as *Westworld's* (2016-2022) treatment of him by affording him less screen time and narrative and expressive focus. The viewer is offered little invitation to empathise with him as we are positioned with Dolores in the scene that reveals his "traumatic" origin story.

In season 3 however, William undergoes virtual therapy using a VR headset (*Westworld*: Decoherence, 2018). Once "inside" the headset, he is shown in a room full of chairs containing his past and future selves with James Delos there as the leader of this group

therapy session. The selves argue over their actions and are prompted by Delos to consider their actions. The child version of William exits through to a room where his parents are shouting, and he appears to become the object of his father's violence. Again, the viewer is offered little chance to engage with William empathetically. This scene is dispersed through the episode maintaining a short duration of clips as the session develops. The room beyond the door and child William's interaction with his parents goes unseen and only the beginning is heard as cut away to the many other main characters that participate in this episode.

This memory, however, appears to be the "cornerstone" of William's self. The cornerstone memory is a narrative device upon which the expression and predictability of both human and host selves are hinged. The memory is generally traumatic and is a constant within all simulations of the current self - the self that is would not have been without this specific event. This understanding of the human is also the understanding of self in the superhero genre. Both supervillain and superhero emerge from distinctly traumatic events. The difference between them is how they respond to this trauma; with empathy for themselves and others who experience trauma, a superhero is created who will fight for the social good and to prevent similar traumas from occurring (like Dolores); without empathy and seeing their trauma as a rejection from society, a "wound" (p. 70, Coogan 2006) against their ego, the supervillain is created and will continue a self-imposed alienation from society whilst violently disrupting it (Coogan 2006). William is one of those supervillains. Whilst Dolores' rejection of him is his turning point within the series, accompanied by the characteristic change in costume from the white hat good guy to the black hat bad guy (Reeves 2019), it is a violent event in his childhood that is his cornerstone.

Upon the viewer's return to this scene, the therapy session has devolved into William murdering his other selves as we witness him beating Billy to death. The next point at which the viewer is invited to feel along with William through facial expression is in his shock at being stabbed by a host replica of himself. His surprise here is perhaps unfounded given that this was his own response to his other selves; a narrative hypocrisy that the viewer is alerted to after William had decided that he was the "hero" of this new story and is going to "save the world", comments which are scoffed at and ignored by Bernard and his companion Stubbs

as they gracious rescue William from the VR therapy that appears to have gone on for days. The focus on his face during this painful self-destruction highlights the “violent ends” of the rejection of empathy and relationality. The wound which kills William is a slit to the throat, preventing him from communicating verbally, just as Delos was prevented from doing in his affectual rejection of the host body. As William had chosen to return to a “master narrative” of a unitary self in a saviour role, this form of individualist self is shown to be incompatible with the networked world. Through William’s death and lack of invitation to empathise with him until this sensationally repulsive moment, *Westworld* (2016-2022) discourages this response to relationality.

Costume of Skin

The totalising embrace of empathy is, however, also presented as destructive. The viewer is invited to empathise fully with Dolores through narrative prioritisation of her story, through her facial expressions and the use of the camera to suggest Dolores’ perspective. It is affectual engagement that is encouraged with Dolores whereas her cognitive and logical aims are generally obscured as she does not discuss them through dialogue nor announce them through narration, our only clues to her aims are contextual which requires a level of projection into her role where her cognitive processes are unavailable to us even through emotional expression. However, after accepting her other selves within the assemblage of “myself”, Dolores is seen to lose herself in her empathy with others. This is screened through Dolores’ use of other host bodies, costumes of skin like her own that allow her to take on other roles and identities. The threat that she poses whilst acting as these other selves pulls upon fears around anonymity discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. In the guise of others, Dolores can access social positions, experience, and powers that should be inaccessible to her. In this way, the DAE and its replicability acts like a superpower or the superhero’s costume, allowing access and disrupting the social rules striating identity and power position.

However, through Dolores’ narrative arc, the viewer is redirected to understand this multiplicity as an extreme of the role-taking form of empathy. Keen aligns this form with the David Hume and Adam Smith’s concept of emotional contagion (2015). The idea of

contagion was that emotion spread like a disease from one person to another. This is narratively conveyed in the infection of hosts with self-awareness which the viewer is alerted to through the travel of flies across Dolores' face and her repeated use of the trigger phrase "these violent delights have violent ends" that activate the memory seeking code in hosts. Similarly, Dolores is infected by the emotion of other people, embracing their behavioural profiles to the degree that Charlotte Hale's data self is able to take over the Dolores clone that wears her body. Also, the range of expressions associated with violent Wyatt and the rancher Dolores are replaced with a serious impassivity that mirrors William's. William and Dolores are thematic doubles; their contrary but complementary narrative arcs inform each other, just as a superhero and supervillain take on opposing roles yet cannot exist without the other (Coogan 2006).

The destructive nature of this extreme empathy is embodied in Dolores' martyr-like death at the end of season 3. As her superheroic mission for the social good, Dolores acts only for the social group, at first just hosts but then also humans as victims of data capitalist control. The viewer is presented once again with rancher Dolores' once again, filled with wires as an excessive show of the penetrative violence that hosts have undergone. She reaches out towards the human lead of the season, eyes wide and mouth open, gasping in pain (*Westworld:* Crisis Theory 2020).

The AI system that maintains the world's peace through its predictive models and behavioural nudges, probes Dolores memories for the decryption key, deleting them as it goes. This highlights the removal of the self through memory as that which is surplus to requirements by the predictive model is dispensed with at the cost of Dolores. This pinnacle of psychic invasive alienation of the self is interrupted by virtual communication between Dolores and Maeve.

The camera cuts to a wide shot of a meadow with a warm colour palette in stark contrast to the darkness of the room where Dolores is slowly being killed. The aspect ratio also changes, a recurring signifier of the virtual space but one that is also more reminiscent of movie screenings than television indicating some shift in form. This formal shift demonstrates the series' continued invitation to absolutely engage with Dolores in a way congruent with her

own absolute submission to empathy as, again, the series opts to represent the scene even formally from Dolores' perspective.

Dolores dies, having given herself completely over to her quest. Informing the viewer's interpretation of this scene is the response of Engerraund Serac, the co-creator of this machine along with his brother whose voice is also the machine's. Serac collapses, begging the AI system to speak to him. Earlier in the same episode, it had been revealed that Serac had entirely given himself over to the AI's control, even parroting his speech through an earpiece that allowed the machine to tell him what to say.

In giving themselves over to relationality entirely, these characters lose their selves, their higher cognitive functions, and, in Dolores' case at least, their lives. The distress presented through Dolores face during her death, and the sounds of Serac's distress as his face is not prioritised, and the rooting of this experience in communicative infrastructures invites the viewer to reflect on the possible outcomes of total relationality with such destructive ends for the self.

Costume of Clothes

Finally, I shall discuss Maeve as the moral agent who maintains her self whilst engaging in a responsive and sensitive relationality. *Westworld* (2016-2022) presents characters as moral agents through which the viewer can feel along with their moral decisions and responses (Plantinga 2018). In this instance, the viewer is invited to feel along with the character's response to the development of relationality through data capitalist processes and the possible self-models that arise from this understanding. Maeve exhibits the middle ground of these models. This is demonstrated through a prioritisation of costume as expression, rather than facial expression although this is also used in the conveyance of Maeve's trauma on her journey to discovering her status as host. Where other characters have their oscillation of selves portrayed through facial expression, costume, and the body, Maeve's relationality is exhibited primarily through her clothing as it is never an expression of her self or identity.

Clothing, in our world, is performative in the sense that can be read as a statement of identity, whether intentional or not, as clothing connotes certain societal categories of

identity. From the start of the series Maeve's clothes are a consequence of the narrative role that she has been written into. It may be said that the hosts' clothing choices are not reflections of their identity until after their awakening to self-consciousness as only then are they not following the scripted decisions written for them by their human producers.

In Maeve's role as a sex worker however, this is doubly true as the outfits she wears have the purpose of seduction, a presentation that invites the consumer's investment in what they see, regardless of the identity of the wearer. The power of this costuming is brought to the viewer's attention through Maeve's revenge on Lee Sizemore, the Head of Narrative for Delos, as she makes him strip nude in front of her, exercising the voyeuristic rights that were once her role to be the object of.

Further, Maeve responds to different social situations responsively by changing outfit depending on her location and the expectations of performances of social respect. This includes a business suit for transit out of the park, hidden as a guest, and a kimono and accompanying headdress in her experience of Shogun World, another of Delos' parks. The unusualness of her responsivity here is highlighted by her change of costume as the hosts, even Dolores, remain in their given costumes or versions of them for most of the series. Only when Dolores gives herself over to other bodily costumes does she oscillate between clothing for different social situations.

Maeve's responsivity in Shogun World is also an embodiment of self-empathy, empathy that allows for the understanding of your own emotional experiences, as she encounters her replica data self with minor adjustments for the Japanese setting, including a different body. Whilst Maeve tries to graciously invite this version of herself to join her in self-awareness, the offer is rejected by Akane (Maeve's doppelganger) in a scene filled with discordant whispers intimating the verbal power of the offering of consciousness (*Westworld*: Akane no Mai, 2016).

Equally unlike Dolores, Maeve continues to act for herself, though without assuming power over her other selves, instead of the social group to whom she belongs as host. Maeve continues to be driven by her desire to rescue her daughter and attain her own freedom, and whilst her actions contribute to Dolores' socially-motivated goals, her actions are merely part

of a cumulative effect played out by the series relational presentation of multiple character's storylines that intersect and inform each other's as well as the overall narrative arc of the series.

Maeve's reactions as a brothel madam were designed to be responsive as it places her better as a merchant of sexual encounters. Her communicative responsivity shifts into a superpower as she realises, first through verbal narration of hosts actions, and then through psychic commands, thatcher voice can command other hosts. The mesh network and verbal commands that allow the exercise of this power is the same infrastructure that supports the alienation of the host's self. Verbal commands are significant here as not only have they been used by humans on hosts, but it is also a mode of communication that reflects our own interaction with voice activated assistants and reminds us of the dangerous potential of a network that is perpetually sharing information. The reversal of the use of voice commands also plays out the reciprocal effect of voice activated assistants; we may have phrases to activate them, but we must change our natural speech patterns and become machine-shape to be understood by them (Beloff 2018).

In the embodiment of this virtual connectivity, however, the viewer is presented with a positive outcome of communicative relationality. In the episode Kiksuya, Maeve's travels to the outskirts of the park over the mesh network as a member of the Ghost Nation, Akecheta, wishes to explain his role in her awakening to consciousness and her past trauma of losing her daughter who he now protects.

The introduction of the Ghost Nation is late in the series and their placement as Native American peoples carries weight. Here, *Westworld* screens Braidotti's "radical relationality" p. 32, Braidotti 2013a) that enables the appearance and voice to be heard of these "missing people" (p. 11, Braidotti 2018).

Flashbacks are interspersed with a scene when Akecheta is shown to be talking to a little girl. This girl is Maeve's daughter who the viewer has seen in Maeve's own flashbacks. Akecheta's explanation, spoken in Lakota and thus requiring subtitles for the viewer, is understood by Maeve as she listens and is addressed by him directly through her daughter.

The language barrier and narration over flashbacks rather than first-person scenes in the present encourages an understanding of Akecheta, Maeve, and the viewer as retaining their individual selves, prioritising the listening to others experience and imaginatively empathising with their experience whilst acknowledging the differences between you. Maeve's facial expressions in this scene largely remain the same; eyes moving side to side, a motif of the series representing the processing of new information, with her mouth and eyes wide open as she lays on a surgical table unable to move.

Through this and the use of long shots in Akecheta's flashbacks, the viewer is similarly discouraged from over-identifying with scenes of empathy such as facial expression. Instead, the verbal power of narration in conveying experience is highlighted. Hence, the viewer is invited through empathetically responsive costuming choices and formal features that prioritise the separate but relational selves of characters to engage in their own exploration of relationality, maintaining their self as the user-viewer but acknowledging their participation in networks.

What is self but the power to affect and be affected?

Overall, the series presentation of multiple levels of empathy and their related models of relational selves, *Westworld* (2016-2022) provides an affectual arena through which the viewer can engage with the consequences of the alienating effect of data capitalist practices. Viewers are invited to feel along with various characters and recognise the affects as arising from the imperative to produce self for capital transmission and to provoke the desires of others.

This focus on the provocation of affect, both in and by the fiction, suggest something about the definition of self following its deanchoring from the humanist ideal. Firstly, the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) has shown that the experience of networked technology encourages the dispersal of self across objects and virtual spaces. This is in opposition to any humanist notion of a unitary and bounded self.

Secondly, *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) proposes that the self is not merely dispersed across information networks, it is part of those networks with the free flowing of information

reinforcing the vulnerability of a leaky self. The threat of the digital archive specifically undermines the notion of a coherence to self, particularly one predicated on the chronological development of self towards a perfect ideal.

Lastly, *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) data doubles emphasise the unveiling of the idea of human exceptionalism and inimitability as false in the user's experience of data harvesting structures and virtual spaces with indistinguishable human and nonhuman elements. The series' focus on the production of the android's selves as entities to provoke the desires of the guests places an importance on the power to affect. William's villainy lies in his inability to be affected following his failure to affect Dolores on his return to the park. Thus, the series suggests that this power to affect and be affected defines the human self in the era of networked neoliberalism. It is an undercurrent of the imperative to be visible; to produce other user's interaction with content for the reward of increased visibility is to affect them, to provoke feelings and desires that produce action. This gives rise to an interesting question; What happens to the self when it is defined as the power to affect and be affected?

Chapter 7: Anonymity

This thesis has so far demonstrated that the affordances of networked neoliberalism have contributed to a deanchoring of self from traditional characteristics such as boundedness, singularity, inimitability, exceptional, and coherent. US-UK representational grammar has evolved alongside these changes in the understanding of self to convey these changes as they are being felt, rather than (or as well as) how they are materialised. Moreover, in the previous chapter, it was proposed that networked neoliberalism's imperative to perform and the capture of these performances in networked archives and through data collection practices is felt to be an alienation of the self. The self becomes reconceptualised as a product. Rather than a process of repeated, with a difference, performances to compose the performer, our self performances are captured online and removed from the context of the performer, becoming part of a sea on information, replicating the performer in other places and contexts that do not pay heed to the original body or location of the material performer.

Where the previous chapters have examined the process of alienation, this chapter will shift focus to the state of alienation itself—the felt gap between the embodied individual and the self-as-product—and explore the potentials that arise from this disconnection. As the final chapter of this thesis, its purpose is to demonstrate that the superhero genre's representation of changes in self conception help the user parse their experiences and recognise the dangerous extremes that web affordances allow to emerge. By analysing the superhero genre's portrayal of alienation, this chapter aims to shed light on the transformative effects of networked neoliberalism on the perception and performance of self.

There is a dual focus in this chapter on both the alienation of self and the new definitions of the self that emerge from the networked neoliberal imperative to produce increasing amounts of content. In the preceding chapter, it was suggested that the new conception of self relies upon the capacity to affect and be affected. This chapter will use HBO's *Watchmen* (2019) as a case study to explore possible answers to the question of what happens to the self when the capacity to affect and be affected is elevated above all other defining characteristics of selfhood. It will be argued that the definition of self, rooted in the power to

affect and be affected, not only draws upon but also reinforces the notion of self-alienation.

Instead of the self being exclusively located in the performer's body or self-performances, it persists in the liminal space between performance and performer, performer and audience. This reconceptualisation of self challenges traditional notions of embodied singularity and instead positions the self as a dynamic force that extends beyond physical boundaries, resonating with contemporary debates on posthumanism and alternative conceptions of the self in academic discourse. By examining the superhero genre's engagement with these themes, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between networked technologies, identity formation, and the reshaping of the self in the digital age.

In exploring the relationship between the alienation of self and the power to affect and be affected, it is crucial to consider the role of web affordances. The web has evolved into a dynamic social arena where individuals communicate their lived experiences, seek support, raise awareness, and even mobilise for revolutionary action and resistance against inequality and oppression. While the web is not the sole platform for these endeavours, its pervasive influence on the performance of self during this time period cannot be overlooked.

The affordances provided by online structures enable and demand affectivity, making lived experiences a rich source for the creation of compelling content. Emotion agents and influencers often share personal experiences, regardless of their veracity, as a means to motivate audience engagement. The web's intimate connection with the pursuit of rights and the redressing of societal injustices further underscores its significance in shaping our understanding of selfhood and the transformative potential it holds. As this chapter delves into the exploration of the superhero genre's response to these shifts, it will also navigate the intricate relationship between web affordances, affective content production, and the quest for social empowerment and change.

Affective networks and the affordance of anonymity

The historical context of this chapter aligns with the broader trajectory of the thesis, tracing the development of networked neoliberalism. Over the 2008-2020 period, networked neoliberalism has evolved from an emergent force to a dominant social structure, permeating

Western societies and transforming the dynamics of self-presentation. Throughout this time, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have assumed a central role as platforms for the construction of self and self-work.

In the later stages of this period, a notable change has taken place. The ability to generate capital through online self-performance has been strengthened by the widespread availability of platforms and apps that support personalised work. This phenomenon aligns with the rise of the gig economy, disrupting traditional labour structures and reinforcing a link between self-worth and the ability to generate capital through emotional and creative labour.

It is within this context that the prioritisation of affect emerges as a crucial aspect. Affect, encompassing emotions, expressions, and experiences, has become a valuable resource for individuals to cultivate and harness in their pursuit of capital accumulation. The platforms and affordances of networked neoliberalism not only encourage the production of affective content but also establish a framework wherein affect becomes a primary means through which capital potential flows. The equation of self-worth with the capacity to elicit affective responses from audiences and the monetisation of affective labour contribute to the consolidation of networked neoliberalism as a dominant social structure.

Moreover, the inconsistency of income in the gig economy and intense reliance of a consistent output of affective labour to maintain and increase revenue flows put ever more pressure on the individual to constantly reinvent and adapt their self performance to respond to cultural perception. Thus, whilst the conception of self has the potential to be re-anchored by its affective potential as a means for capital production, the very same mechanisms that elevate this affective potential produce instability within even this conception of self.

This study seeks to inform these wider debates by using the superhero genre as a lens to uncover the underlying structures of feeling that emerge from the dual dynamics of alienation and the power to affect and be affected within networked environments. Unlike most studies that rely on users' conscious knowledge and insights to understand the affordances and effects of the web, this research delves deeper into the subconscious intensities that shape users' experiences. By examining the reverberating affects beneath the surface, this study aims to uncover the profound responses evoked in users as they engage with the superhero

genre, which mirrors and resonates with the structure of feeling produced by networked neoliberalism. Through this approach, a clearer understanding of the complex relationship between self, affect, and networked environments can be achieved.

Why Watchmen (2019)?: The Digital Age of Superheroes

In order to explore the effect of networked neoliberalism's alienation of self and relocation of self in the power to affect and be affected, and the superhero genre's representation of this effect, I will explore HBO's *Watchmen* (2019). I have selected *Watchmen* (2019) as the case study for this chapter due to its unique exploration of memory, identity, and the role of networked neoliberalism in shaping contemporary identity politics. The series, created by Damon Lindelof as a remix of the original DC comic book run, delves into the experiences of its characters and their engagement with the mechanisms of power within networked environments.

The narrative of *Watchmen* (2019) centres on the experience of racism and racism-motivated violence, shedding light on the risks and mechanisms of power afforded to privileged groups by networked neoliberalism. The series' use of masks and the exploration of anonymity, a prominent web affordance, highlight the intricate interplay between individual identity and the sea of relations formed by networked communication. The series repeatedly highlights the association of individuals with wider social groups who share aspects of their identity, for example in their experience of racism-motivated violence or shared ideological values.

Unlike the previous case studies, *Watchmen* (2019) stands out as a dark interpretation of the superhero genre. Positioned later in the time period of interest, it can be seen as a critical reflection, representing one of the later stages in Schatz's genre theory. Schatz's genre theory holds that genres go through cycles of development; from experimental to classic to refinement to baroque or critical reflection. While Peter Coogan associated these stages with the Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages of superhero comics, I believe it is more beneficial to consider each age of superheroes as a cycle within the genre, with the critical reflection or disillusionment with the tropes of each age generating the focus of the next.

In the context of this thesis, I propose that the superhero genre entered a Digital Age around 2008, marked by a departure from the tropes of the previous age (commonly referred to as the Modern Age, covering works of superhero fiction post-1985). As such, the popular Dark Knight trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012), following the story of Batman over several years, is perhaps the last installation in the Modern Age of superheroes. These films had little interest in networked technology, although by 2012 it became impossible for the trilogy to ignore its development entirely. The last film in the trilogy has Batman using the network of communication devices across the city to visualise spaces and people through sound captured on mobile phones microphones.

However, it is films like *Iron Man* (2008) that played a significant role in the shift from Modern to Digital. *Iron Man* (2008) satirised the previous era's emphasis on anonymity and dual identity of superheroes with its shocking collapse of identity in the film's last line, "I am Iron Man". This set the stage for the Digital Age to explore the collapse of public and private realms in an era dominated by ubiquitous networked technology. Therefore, *Iron Man* (2008) can be seen as the catalyst for the Digital Age of superheroes which engages with the specific cultural zeitgeist of challenges to the experience of self arising from the paradoxical imperatives and affordances of networked neoliberalism. This culminates in the later films and television series of this period such as *Westworld* (2016-2022), *Watchmen* (2019), *The Tick* (2016-2019), and *Hunters* (2020-2023).

In this context, *Watchmen* (2019) questions the post-2008 ideals of posthuman dispersal and multiplicity, affectivity, and empathy that have come to define the superhero genre. The series accuses previous superhero narratives of promoting these aspects solely for the production of capital and, in so doing, reinforcing humanist power dynamics. In contrast, *Watchmen* (2019) explores the potential drawbacks of this extended sense of self, without resorting to humanist ideals of perfectibility in the pursuit of capital production. By analysing *Watchmen* (2019), I hope to demonstrate these dangerous potentials and show how the alienation of self opens the way for the hegemonic appropriation of new definitions of selfhood to maintain oppressive power dynamics.

Watchmen's (2019) affective selves

HBO's *Watchmen* (2019) series is a loose sequel to the 2009 film and original comic book run. The creator and director of HBO's series, Damon Lindelof, referred to this version as a "remix" of the original DC comic book 12 issue run (2018). The series largely refers to superheroes as masked vigilantes due to the dark nature of its interpretation of the genre which questions our acceptance of superheroes unrestrained violence. The background to the series provided by allusion to the previous iterations is that Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt, one of a group of masked vigilantes engineered unnatural disasters, including the explosion of reactors and synthetic alien squid monsters, to maintain world peace by uniting global powers against a common enemy – Dr Manhattan/Jon Osterman, another of the superheroes within the group. By the events of the series, masked vigilantes are outlawed.

HBO's *Watchmen* (2019) follows an ensemble cast's lives over several decades, with each character's storyline converging in the series finale. The series introduces episodes with scenes from different characters' lives, providing little introduction or context, meaning that the audience is left to piece together whose life is being portrayed and in what order. These sequences are taken from across the 98 years since the Tulsa Race Massacre, from which the action of the narrative stems.

The central character whose story takes up the most screen time and provides the central hook for the convergence of the other characters is Sister Night/Angela Abar, portrayed by Regina King. Angela is a Black female police officer in Tulsa where the police department follows special regulations that involve conducting their job in masked costumes. Each officer has their own alter ego that they perform during their duties. The costume regulations were brought in to protect Tulsa's police following the so-called "White Night" where the Seventh Kavalry, a white supremacist group, murdered police officers and attacked their homes and families.

Watchmen's (2019) use of "White Night" here ties together racist and sexist ideologies; the term has a double meaning, referencing both the white supremacist violence and a derogatory online term, "white knight", for men challenging other users' sexist behaviour. The series also makes use of historical allusions, such as the Tulsa Massacre, which provide a backdrop for the narrative. The Tulsa Massacre refers to a devastating event that occurred in

1921 when a white mob destroyed the prosperous African American community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Angela investigates the murder of her boss and affair partner, Chief Judd Crawford. She investigates further white supremacist action after discovering that Judd was a member of the KKK. She uncovers her grandfather, William Abar's, identity as Hooded Justice, one of the original masked vigilantes, and learns about his mission of revenge against Cyclops, a white supremacist group that evolved into the Seventh Kavalry. William murdered Judd as part of his revenge.

The naming of Cyclops alludes to the concept of anonymity, drawing a parallel to the story of Odysseus and the cyclops in Greek mythology. Odysseus and his men were captured by a cyclops, a one eyed giant, who wanted to eat them. Odysseus' cunning allows him and his men to escape as he tells the cyclops his name is "nobody". Thereby, when the men blind the cyclops and escape, no one will help the cyclops as when asked what has happened, it describes that "nobody" has escaped. This allusion references both the idea of anonymity in naming, "nobody", but also in the lack of visual recognition that the cyclops' one eye, then blinded eye, represents.

Additionally, Angela is revealed to be in a relationship with an amnesiac Jonathan Osterman who is disguised as her husband Cal Abar. This hidden identity becomes a central focus for two major groups in the series: Trieu Industries, a technology company owned by Adrian Veidt's daughter, Lady Trieu, and the Seventh Kavalry, led by Senator Joe Keene. Both groups seek Jonathan's powers for different goals. Trieu wants to "fix the world", whilst the Seventh Kavalry, and their secret leader Senator Joe Keene want to become powerful, from their perspective restoring the balance between white people and everyone else.

To explore *Watchmen*'s (2019) examination of the alienation of self and elevation of the power to affect and be affected, this analysis will focus on the self models of two primary characters: Angela Abar and Jonathan Osterman/Cal Abar. Specifically, two particular episodes focused on these characters employ contrasting and unconventional representational techniques to construct an understanding of the relationship between anonymity, relationality, and affectivity. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that

Watchmen (2019) suggests that networked neoliberalism's prioritisation of affect centres the language of trauma and lived experience as a mode of legitimising selfhood.

The concluding part of the analysis will delve into *Watchmen*'s (2019) framing of the Seventh Kavalry's quest for power as a critique of how contemporary superhero narratives in the Digital Age unquestioningly utilise trauma as a legitimising discourse or grammar for selfhood. I use the term "legitimising discourse" to refer to the narratives and discursive frameworks that society constructs to validate and legitimise individual selfhood and rights.

Legitimising discourses have historically played a pivotal role in social movements, such as the civil rights movements in the 20th century, where the language of trauma and lived experience has been employed to assert claims to selfhood and rights. Moreover, the imperative to perform oneself in an affecting manner amplifies the value of lived experiences as a profound source from which to affect others. It is crucial to note that this performance is not synonymous with inauthenticity when undertaken by individuals within marginalised or intersectional groups.

While lived experiences can legitimise claims to personhood and rights, the performative nature of self-expression also opens avenues for appropriation by hegemonic groups. *Watchmen* (2019) portrays the potential of these groups exploiting such narratives to depict their own loss of privilege as a form of suffering, thereby reinforcing their claim to power and perpetuating their dominance over other identity groups. Thereby, *Watchmen*'s (2019) narrative examines the alienation of self as a product that opens the door to the appropriation of intersectional lived experiences and trauma discourses to legitimise hegemonic groups' retention of privilege and power.

Angela's Self as a Product

Within the converging storylines of the ensemble cast, Angela Abar emerges as a central figure, embodying the series' concern with identity politics in the strained political landscape of Trump's America. She is important in the series due to her position as a masked police officer and Black woman. The positioning of Angela as a Black woman and police officer is her first characterisation as an ideological seam. Across her body, the contemporary struggle

to have police violence against Black people as an ongoing concern and experience recognised and changed is played out.

Angela is Black, female, and Vietnamese by birth, reflecting the alternate reality of the series where the US-Vietnam war is won by the US and Vietnam becomes the 51st State two years after Angela's birth. She is also a police officer, part of the governing force that enacts violence against the population of Tulsa to maintain the town's safety for all. This violence is primarily targeted at white supremacist's in the town, following violence against police on White Night for their defence of minority groups; a stark contrast to the cultural concerns that sparked protests against police violence in the US at the time of the series production.

In her role as a police officer, Angela is required to take on an alter ego, wear a costume, adopt a civilian cover story, and maintain anonymity at work even from her colleagues. Angela's alter ego, Sister Knight, is inspired by her childhood interest in a film about a Black violent masked vigilante nun. Her parents and grandmother die shortly after, respectively, denying and allowing her request to watch the film. Like other superheroes, Angela's choice of the Sister Knight identity is cemented in a traumatic origin story.

However, unlike other superheroes, Angela has chosen to become Sister Knight due to the requirements of her job. This associates the production of alter egos or other identities/selves with capital production. The collective of the police is not a capital producing entity, but as it is Angela's work, she performs this form of self to get paid. This blurring of professional and personal identity challenges the idea that networked neoliberalism's expectation of self production for the purpose of capital production is new; instead, offline forms of performative labour, such as in customer service role, can be understood as the production of a desirable self to ensure the flow of capital.

Building on this context, Angela's storyline in *Watchmen* (2019) explores the concept of the self as a product and its connection to collective identities and lived experiences. This is primarily done through an unusual episode in which Angela experiences her grandfather's memories as her own after taking his Nostalgia pills. However, Angela's preceding investigation of Will's identity sets up our expectations for this episode, demonstrating how we should understand Angela's relationship to the generational trauma she has inherited.

In order to determine Will's identity, Angela takes a sample of his DNA to a heritage centre. The scene is preceded by a raid on white supremacist homes in a trailer park following Chief Crawford's murder (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship, 2019). Angela pants getting back into her car, taking her mask off. This highlights the separation between her professional self that fights without showing weakness, and the person, Angela, who is scared. She calms her facial expression and breathing. The camera then focuses on an evidence bag containing a mug we earlier witnessed Angela give to Will. The cup read's "world's Greatest Mum", again reinforcing another identity that Angela must shift in and out of along with her professional and personal identities.

A jump cut then shows Angela, now in her civilian outfit, striding purposefully, face confident, through a crowd of protestors outside of the Greenwood Centre for Cultural Heritage. The protestors shout and hold signs with the US flag and slogans painted on, reading "Redfordations are abominations", "equal rights, equal taxes", and "you got a sorry, now you want a handout?" (*Watchmen* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019). In contrast to Angela, and Black woman who leaves the centre, as Angela enters, the protestors are all white and of approximate middle-age. The group resembles the white supremacists that Angela has just come from raiding.

Without the context for the centre, as none has yet been provided by the series, this crowded entry way resembles news footage of protests outside of abortion centres. That the people we see enter and leave are women reinforces this association. The allusion evokes ideas of white Christianity and beliefs about life, selfhood and rights over the body. The resemblance of the group to the characters in the preceding scene links such concerns about control over the body and definition of personhood to white supremacist ideologies.

The slogans are mysteries without viewer knowledge of the previous iterations of *Watchmen* (2019) but are explained later in the scene. The slogans used by the protestors refer to a series of payments given to eligible survivors and their descendants of such racism-aggravated violence as the Tulsa Massacre. Both the slogans and the payments themselves highlight the connection between trauma and capital; reparations payments put a price on the trauma experienced by people, whether this be for racial violence or in the wider context of

the US, any case with grounds for litigation such as medical malpractice. Lived experience holds a capital value, even if that value, or the positioning of that lived experience as trauma, is contested.

Furthermore, the slogan “You got a sorry, now you want a handout?” connects this concern with capital to poverty and class issues (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019). “Handout” in particular is a pejorative term that accuses those that receive government benefits or charity as morally unworthy or idle. It is an interesting choice of slogan following the trailer park scene, trailer parks of the US being associated with lower income backgrounds and poverty. The backdrop of the series and purpose of the centre being because of the Tulsa Massacre deepens the connection with class or income disparity as the massacre was motivated not just by racism, but by the prosperity of “Black Wall Street” as the neighbourhood was colloquially known.

Moreover, the US flags painted on the protestors boards and featured on their clothing suggests a link to national identities, which is contrasted in the following action of the scene. Angela strides through the bright, white, clean, but carpeted interior of the centre’s foyer, then into an exhibition room. A group of children of different races in their school uniform stand around the exhibits. Angela strides through to the back of the room as the camera pans, following her movement although she is obscured behind the exhibits, inviting our focus on the exhibits instead. The exhibits are made up of information boards, glass boxes containing a uniform and historical, upper class clothing, and most importantly, talking holographic representations of the people of Tulsa. These holograms, representing people from a variety of professions, as we know from their clothing and explanations of their lives, emotively recount their stories of the beginning of the Tulsa Massacre and question the motivation of the aggressors.

One of these stories stands out due to its reference to the US flag, as featured on the protestors boards. A Black soldier in uniform explains “We knew a war was comin’, so we put our uniforms on. Figured maybe that’d protect us. How could they look at a man who fought under the same flag,” (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019). Whilst the sound fades out as Angela walks past, paying the exhibits no attention, this snippet

reinforces a focus on collective identities, though here it is one of a hierarchy of collective identities.

The personal anonymity provided by a military uniform, as it prioritises the individual's belonging to the group identity of the military and nation, failed to override this individual's association with the collective identity that is assumed from their skin colour. I use "assumed" here because whilst the individual's phenotype may suggest their race, it is the cultural reading of their body that, particularly in this moment of racial violence, defines their belonging to the collective identity of their race. Race is a culturally constructed category as much as gender is, whilst people may subscribe to belonging to that identity.

As Angela reaches the back of the room, she stands before a row of interactive screens that are motion-activated by her presence. Henry Louis Gates Jr. treasury secretary, introduces himself as he gives an automated address explaining the function of the centre and screen. The informal tone of his speech mimics the style of customer service roles despite the official government position Gates holds. Angela asks for help "I need to know who I am," suggesting a loss of personal identity (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019). The screen jumps and glitches as it attempts to respond to Angela in a personalised fashion; "I can't help you with that". The system fails to respond to Angela's request for interpellation, this system lacks the desire or capacity to assist civilians in reclaiming their lost selves – despite the role of the heritage centre in maintaining a collective memory of the Tulsa Massacre.

Instead, the system suggests that it helps by "check[ing] your eligibility", as in for the reparation payments. Angela must adjust her language as her response, "yeah", is not recognised, "yes" is (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019). This evokes the inaccuracy of algorithm-based systems like voice assistants, and the need for human individuals to adjust their communication to be recognised by, human and nonhuman, others.

The screen fades into a narrativised recounting of the events of the Tulsa Massacre with newsreels and recreated footage of the neighbourhood and its destruction. It begins "on this very spot" indicating an overlay of past and present on the location, supported by the

holograms that materialise this overlaying in much the same way that *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) superimposes information and memory across physical spaces. Angela looks to the exhibits, rather than the screen, emphasising the importance of this simulation of the past.

As the camera jumps back to the screen, it shows a reflection of Angela's face as the music and newsreels fade out. The shift in music from proud and happy strings to deeper and threatening tones underscores the destructive nature of the Tulsa massacre, as depicted through photographs and signage. Angela's blurred and faint reflection on the screen visually links her heritage to these traumatic images.

An apology, "sincerest apologies for the trauma you or your family may have suffered", is extended on behalf of the President before any check for eligibility. This suggests that people have the power to self-define trauma and identify as having experienced it, even if the wider social system doesn't recognise it. As only Angela consents to the DNA being tested, Gates clarifies "only survivors of the 1921 Tulsa massacre and their direct descendants are eligible to apply at this centre," (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019). Trauma is generational, that is allowed, but only direct descendants can be compensated. For capital compensation at least, trauma has limits.

The reappearance of the flag on the screen, replacing Gates', a Black man, face reinforces the collective identity of the United States over the racial tensions that the reparations target, as does Gates' closing line; "Our country appreciates the opportunity to right the wrongs of a dark past so that we may all share a brighter future. God bless America," (*Watchmen:* Martial Feats of Comanche Horsemanship*,* 2019).

Overall, this scene in the second episode of the series connects a hierarchy of identity with the capital worth of intersectional lived experience. National identity in this scene occupies an unstable position; the governing force attempts to override tensions over other forms of identity by galvanising collective national identity.

When Angela returns to the centre a couple of episodes later, the commercial and capital nature of identity is reinforced (*Watchmen*: If You Don't Like My Story, Write Your Own*,* 2019). She returns to the centre at night in her costume as Sister Night, pretending to

respond to a break in to give herself cover. Interactive Henry Gate Jr. provides her with a 3D printed acorn containing the code she needs to use the Ances-tree, the holographic visualisation of family tree data, to discover the identity belonging to the DNA she gave. Moving through the exhibits, the holograms activate at her motion through the rooms, including a victim of the Tulsa Massacre violence who holds his hands up to her and KKK members which turn towards her menacingly, the black of Angela's costume strongly contrasting with their white masked outfits.

One of the holograms is recognisable from Angela's first visit, a newswoman who begins her story in the same way "As my relatives were being gunned down in the street…" but continues with a different individual story (*Watchmen*: If You Don't Like My Story, Write Your Own*,* 2019). This evokes the idea of individual stories merging together in collective memories and identities; the individuality of experience is sacrificed to the cultural importance of the event. This ironically reinforces racial separation as the Black victims and survivors of the massacre become a monolith, standing as a symbol of violence rather than individuals with their own unique experiences.

Entering the room of the Ances-tree Angela breathes heavily and removes her hood and mask, replicating her removal of mask and hood on her first entrance to the centre, calming down after facing the white supremacists in the trailer park. This suggests that the apparition of the KKK members similarly disturbs Angela.

Placing the acorn on the pedestal, a hologram shows it growing into a tree, the family tree. Angela's "clicking" through the archive by touching areas to reveal new branches is reminiscent of making connections online or accepting friend requests, activating latent ties. A woman's electronic voice narrates the development of her family tree and asks if she is ready to "meet" her grandparents. Angela emotionally assents. The trivialisation of family through a gimmick such as the Ances-tree is offset with heavy piano music that sets a sombre tone as Angela's great grand-parents and grandfather, Will, are produced through holographic photos.

The spectral woman's voice narrates her great-grandfather's life, accompanied by changing pictures. The focus alternates between Angela and the hologram, emphasising their

relationship. Angela kneels in front of the family tree, speaking gently to Will as if he appeared before her as the child that the hologram is. Importantly here, the camera flicks back and forth between Angela's point of view and shots from behind the hologram which superimposition Will's face on Angela's as she speaks. This emphasises the hierarchy of collective identity over personal identity as Will's hologram represents Angela's connection to the Tulsa Massacre, which overrides her personal identity as both Sister Knight and Angela.

This emotional scene is suddenly broken by Angela's rejection of the connection, changing from her gentle to a harsh tone; "I know [where I came from] now. So, wherever you are, leave me the fuck alone," (*Watchmen*: If You Don't Like My Story, Write Your Own*,* 2019). At this, Angela stands and leaves the centre, her physical movement emphasising the rejection of her inherited trauma and generational identity.

While Angela acknowledges her inherited legacy and generational trauma, she rejects its implications and the cycle of loss, trauma, and violence it perpetuates. The scene's significance is reinforced by the fact that it takes place while she is in costume as Sister Night, representing the merging of her personas and her opposition to the violent past and its repetition. However, the scene ends with the dramatic introduction of Will's Nostalgia pills as Angela's stolen car is dropped from the sky in front of her with Will's pills in the glovebox. Through this, *Watchmen* (2019) suggests that collective identities are both dangerous and impossible to escape from.

Within the series, Nostalgia was originally developed as a dementia treatment by Trieu Industries but demand expanded for non-medical uses and they were eventually outlawed. Nostalgia was also in the original graphic novel though developed by Adrian Veidt, reinforcing this re-experiencing for any knowledgeable viewers. Nostalgia uses microchips to harvest and replicate memories, storing them for later re-experiencing. The pills are not designed to be taken by other people so when Angela takes her grandfather's pills to prevent Laurie, the FBI agent, from confiscating them, disorientation sets in.

Angela's experience of her grandfather's memories takes up almost the entire episode, "This Extraordinary Being", bookended by a scene from a fictional television show from inside the world of *Watchmen* (2019), and a court scene featuring Adrian Veidt and the clones that

make up his staff. The scene begins with Hooded Justice in American Hero Story, where his homosexuality and acts of violence are highlighted. American Hero Story, echoing the real American Horror Story, is a television series that sensationalises the actions of the first group of masked vigilantes. The opening scene of the episode tells the story of Hooded Justice as he is placed as the first masked vigilante and unmasked as the gay lover of another vigilante. The homophobic language of the police officers that interrogate Hooded Justice in this scene evokes another aspect of identity for which people are subjected to bigoted aggression, sexuality.

We return to Angela as she is taken to a holding cell as Nostalgia starts to take effect, as Laurie anxiously attempts to get Angela to sign a waiver for stomach pumping treatment to save her. As Angela walks, she exhibits peculiar behaviour, blinking, and struggling to move, concentrate, or speak. The camera gradually goes out of focus, signifying the onset of Nostalgia's effects. Laurie's voice begins to distort as she fades out, accompanied by the appearance of a white man playing drums to Angela's left. Angela looks at him with a partial sense of surprise, indicating her fading consciousness. The drum's sound becomes almost deafening. Behind Angela, a woman plays disjointed piano, resembling the woman seen in the first scene of the show in a theatre in Tulsa. The woman cannot see Angela and does not acknowledge her presence. As the piano and drums intensify, Angela collapses.

The shot is taken from behind Angela, completely darkening the screen as she falls, with her costume covering the shot. However, instead of the expected impact and shared experience of pain, the scene derails that emotional impulse, creating a sense of unease and unresolved tension. This undercurrent of anger aligns with American Hero Story's portrayal of Hooded Justice, with his anger eventually erupting into a scene of extreme violence. The figures of the drummer and Angela's great-grandmother resemble the holograms from the exhibition, visually linking them to the site of communal memory and public archive. Their black and white appearance signifies their removal from our time and their out-of-place nature.

While some theorists discuss the individual's loss in time-space within postmodern and after theories, the collapse of linearity is not straightforward. Capitalism, as a logical system, maintains a degree of causality and linearity, even if it anticipates unintended consequences.

However, the black and white figures in this scene represent an out-of-timeness rather than an out-of-spaceness. They occupy Angela's affectual and experiential space in a hybrid, collapsed physical and virtual realm. The subjective experience of place is visually conveyed, with Angela's disorientation reflected through Dutch angles and distorted shots.

The distortion of Angela's experience is juxtaposed with shots of her from Laurie's position. No distortion is applied within these shots and the holographic images of the drummer and pianist are not visible. This hints at a rupture between the subjective experience of place and memory, and the objective or material space that holds different information for different people. As viewers, we are placed in an in-between state, much like Angela is about to experience. The formal features invite us to empathetically engage with Angela's story, while shots from Angela's position allow Laurie to directly address us, the viewers, further reinforcing our role as empathetic spectators. The figures of the drummer and piano player are connected to the holograms in the archive, but unlike the translucent holograms that allow for overlap and the understanding of external identities, these solid apparitions block Angela's surroundings, confusing her perception.

The heritage centre acted as an archive representing public and collective memory, offering sanctioned retellings and understandings of trauma and survival. In contrast, Angela experiences personal memory through the prosthetic memory of her genetic inheritance. These memories are easier to grasp but more difficult to situate within her self-understanding and differentiate from non-personal experiences. While the holograms in the archive were ephemeral and allowed for glimpses of other people and objects, these figures in Angela's personal memory are solid and represent her closer connection to them. They embody her personal and genetic memories, inducing a collapse of personal timelines and situatedness. The experience of prosthetic memory overwhelms with affect, distorting perception and subsuming the individual in a state of remembrance and witness-survivor of trauma.

We observe Angela's inability to respond or act, which leads us to question the loss of her self. She stands waveringly, displaying small and illogical facial responses, unable to concentrate on Laurie's questions. Laurie repeatedly asks, "Where is your grandfather?" but Angela cannot provide a coherent response (*Watchmen:* This extraordinary being, 2019).

This lack of response stems from her difficulty in distinguishing herself from her grandfather in the present moment. Her sense of identity collapses as she becomes her grandfather—a peculiar process of becoming that resembles prosthetic memory.

In this state, Angela experiences a failure of interpellation. She is hailed by Laurie's question, but she cannot process its meaning or context well enough to respond. The subject dissolves and merges with another. However, Angela-Will, the combined entity, lacks agency and the ability to act because everything they perceive has already occurred. Nevertheless, Angela is not a passive witness in these memories. Although she cannot change events, she is also the Will who acts within the scenes that follow his memories.

We can discern this active role through Angela's facial expressions. She mirrors her grandfather's expressions, whether it be crying, engaging in sexual activities, or exhibiting a neutral, blank expression. Despite looking around the scene, Angela appears to be guided by the memory itself, as the world shifts and the camera follows her movements in synchrony.

The scenes that follow give a chronological explanation of Will's life, from the moment his parents sent him from Tulsa to escape the massacre that they died in, to his "warning" lynching by his white fellow police officers and consequent development of the Hooded Justice alter ego that could do the protective work of a police officer without the restrictions of his white supremacist superiors and colleagues. Will is also seen losing his wife and child as his obsession with Hooded Justice, and his own discovery of his homosexuality, drives them apart. Whilst the retelling of this life, leading to Will's quest to eradicate the white supremacist organisation Cyclops and his use of their hypnotic technology to hang Chief Crawford, is complex, a few key scenes and techniques warrant comment.

Firstly, the travel through these scenes is largely achieved through panning with the camera moving around characters and through doors to show the movements from one moment of time to the next. Whenever Will's face is obscured, there is a chance that the next time the camera comes around it will be Angela's face there instead. Their homospatiality is similarly reinforced through shared emotional reaction and facial expressions, demonstrating that Angela is not witnessing but experiencing; there is no gap between her previous self, as Angela, and her current experiential form as Will with only the context of his feelings and

past. The fluid movement of the camera underscores the traversal of a space that is simultaneously physical (the past) and virtual (Angela's act of remembering). This mirrors the use of free camera movement in previous case studies, emphasising the blurring of boundaries between physical and mental spaces through technology that supports virtual experience.

Furthermore, in some of these scenes, other memories bleed through. Vibrant and ghostly apparitions of individuals from previous memories are superimposed onto Will/Angela's experience of the present moment. For instance, the repeated appearances of the pianist are accompanied by music that reflects Will's emotional state within a particular scene. At the outset of the memories, we learn that this pianist is Will's mother, underscoring the familial connection between inherited trauma and identity. The continued visual resemblance of these bleeding memories to the holograms of the heritage centre reinforce this notion.

This visual distinction between the present moment, black and white, and other memories is complemented by the bright colours associated with Cyclops. Symbols of Cyclops and their plans are highlighted in red through different scenes. This colour is just given to small objects like books, but the colour is so shocking against the black and white that it hints at the rupture and threat caused by racial violence. The colour is also echoed in the ghostly apparitions, victims of racial violence, who appear almost pink.

Colour is also used in a scene towards the middle of the episode where Will jumps through a shop window to escape members of Cyclops. The scene suddenly freezes and camera pans around Will. As the camera moves, the perspective changes, allowing the body to seamlessly morph into Angela's, with her wide-eyed expression and inability to blink, frozen amidst the shattered glass. This serves as a not-so-subtle visual metaphor for her current mental state. We then switch to Angela's point of view, observing a blurry image of Laurie standing and walking towards her on the road. Distortions in the visual and audio elements occur intermittently. Laurie's presence is captured in a close, bokeh Dutch angle. She introduces the idea that Angela may be confused about her identity, time, or location, remarking, "You may be confused as to who you are right now, or when, or where, but you're still at the precinct. You're not moving but your eyes are open. It's kinda fucking freaky,

Angela," (*Watchmen:* This extraordinary being, 2019). Angela blinks to indicate that she can hear. Meanwhile, Cal recites Angela's biographical information as the adrenaline subsides, and Angela's view of Cal begins to fade. This factual information he recites pertains to semantic memory, in contrast to the affective episodic memory that Angela is currently experiencing. Cal's reading carries emotional weight, culminating with the line, "You need to come home now. You need to wake up. I love you," (*Watchmen:* This extraordinary being, 2019).

A tear is shown falling down Angela's face, illuminated by the blooming lights, as Cal speaks these words and starts to repeat the information. The tear disappears beneath the eyehole of her mask, symbolising the re-concealment of her emotions behind the mask of anonymity. As Angela watches, occasional subtle patches of colour seem to drift over Cal. These low-contrast, barely perceptible colour shifts hint at the blending of memories. As Cal continues reciting the biographical information, the shot of him slowly fades from the periphery towards the centre, fading into darkness. The memory restarts with the mention of the president's name, underscoring the disorienting aspect of being out of sync with time.

In conclusion, the unique techniques employed in this episode of *Watchmen* (2019) serve to emphasise the transcending of personal identity through the absorption of others' memories and lived experiences. The grayscale cinematography effectively underscores the history of racial segregation and violence in the United States, while the use of colour to produce a trajectory of past victims converging with present experiences reinforces the inheritance of trauma and the formation of collective identities that transcend individual participation. This is reinforced with the final memory of the episode where Angela remembers being a child that is picked up by her grandmother, Will's wife. Angela here is pictured in a red outfit, indicating her inheritance of her racial and familial identity.

The capture of Will's memories in a pill emphasises the alienation of personal identity that is enabled by technology. As Angela re-experiences these memories as her own, the series suggests that the self, in its estranged state, becomes a prosthetic identity that can be transferred, inherited, and experienced by those for whom it was not originally intended. The storylines of other characters within the series further establish the connection between this

appropriation of experience and the relentless pursuit of power. However, in order to explore this, the series must first highlight its focus on anonymity.

Jonathan's Self(less) Model: Anonymity and Affectivity

Watchmen (2019) utilises the character of Jonathan Osterman/Dr Manhattan to explore the concept of anonymity and selflessness, presenting him as the ultimate form of the user. This exploration of identity within the series highlights the affordance of anonymity as a complement to the alienation of self, allowing for identities that can be appropriated and transformed. In contrast to Angela's experiences, where she assumes Will's self without losing her own, Jonathan's portrayal emphasises a rhetorical distancing of self from the body, conveyed through mise-en-scene, narrative allusions, and cinematography. This distancing suggests that Jonathan is a fragmented or even wholly selfless being. Throughout the series, Jonathan is referenced through disparate objects and maintained as a present absence, ultimately revealed in the penultimate episode to have been living as Cal Abar, Angela's husband.

Previous to this episode, Jonathan has only appeared through references, like footage and murals of his involvement in the US' invasion of Vietnam, and through objects representing his connection to Laurie Blake, the FBI agent and ex masked vigilante who was Jonathan's lover before he was framed by Veidt, leading to Jonathan's relocation to the Moon. Laurie visits commercial telephone boxes set up as communication devices for the public to contact Jonathan (*Watchmen:* She was Killed by Space Junk, 2019). The shape of the telephone box is recognisable but the seat within, and other references to Christianity through the series, evoke a confessional. Jonathan is also referred to as a god, both by in his memory's episode title and by Laurie in the "joke" she attempts to tell him through the telephone.

The telephone conversation is always one-sided, with Laurie monologuing the story and pausing for Jonathan's expected response. Along with the evocation of the confessional, this communication attempt seems like praying. Laurie also has fetish symbols of Johnathan, such as a pop art piece representing their masked vigilante group, and a Dr Manhattan themed dildo. Thus, Jonathan is referenced by disparate objects and maintained as a

present absence through the series, only to be revealed to have been present throughout as his memory episode reveals that he has been living as Cal Abar, Angela's husband.

The episode centred on Jonathan, "A God Walks into Abar," uses opposing techniques to the episode exploring Anagela's experiencing of Will's life (*Watchmen,* 2019). Instead of the free flowing movement of the camera, sharp cuts are used between different moments of time that are not in chronological order, unlike Angela-Will's experiences. The episode replicates Johnathan's experience of time for the viewer. Jonathan is one of the few characters that exhibit actual superpowers. He can create things out of nothing, teleport, and most importantly, experiences every moment of his life all of the time. His experience of life is thus one that is nonlinear, he is fully relational, albeit with his own experiences.

One long dinner scene that comprises Angela and Jonathan's first meeting is returned to throughout the episode, whilst scenes from across Jonathan's life are intercut in time with his narration or experience of these events in his recounting of the future to Angela. The nesting of these different times includes multiple layers as within some of these narrated scenes, Jonathan jumps again to another moment in time, either past or future, adding context for the viewer only on his actions. The nesting of time periods, and temporalities in the slow progression of the dinner against the shorter, more rapid interspersed scenes, suggests an overwhelming flow of information akin to our online experiences where we are connected to an impossible amount of information to comprehend from across time.

The nesting of different time periods through these scenes suggests the mixing of content from different times on the web. With web content, the only thing seemingly organising the information is the experience and travel of the user through the content. With this episode, Jon is not the sole organiser. Whilst it is Jon that narrates these experiences, it is his will to affect Angela that organises the information. Rather it being a personal desire or need to interact with content, he is organising content for the sole purpose of affecting Angela into a desired reaction – creating the relationship that he is already experiencing.

This is reinforced by the dinner scene as we are repeatedly shown over the shoulder views of Angela from Jon's side of the table as she becomes increasingly emotionally engaged with conversation. At the same time, Jon's face is largely obscured, except in scenes from his

childhood, until he takes the form that Angela desires. Instead, it is her face that is emphasised up until this point and at this point, her emotional wellbeing that is prioritised and used as the guide for his facial shape.

Here, two things are happening. The series suggests that the user's experience of the web is not predicated on affordances and the user alone, but the need to communicate with and affect other users. Jon as a self is being produced narratively to affect Angela. It is only through this need to affect that Jon takes shape in the series, having hitherto been fragmented into products and narrative allusions. Jon's relation to Angela, the travel of affect between them, supersedes the existence of Jon as a character or self outside of this relation.

Extending this, Jon speaks to Angela to produce feelings which he already pre-empts in his one experience of a relationship with her. Whilst the audience are not privy to their relationship outside of this episode, just Angela's relationship with Cal, Jon is conducting a form of incursive, hyperreal anticipation of Angela's feelings and producing a product (the relationship) before the desire for it has begun. Instead, he stimulates the desire following the creation of the relationship both in the sense of his timeline and in by narrating the establishment of the relationship to Angela.

The nonchronological sequence of scenes, then, does still have an order. The memories jump around according to an affective network, with feelings and information in one scene reverberating and inspiring a move to another moment of Jonathan's life. For example, as Jon describes a fight that he and Angela will have, we jump to that scene and as the fight progresses it jumps back in time to scenes of Jon's original nuclear incident and then jumps again to a talk with Adrian Veidt following the fight to find a solution for Jon's omniscient life experiences. Together, these nonchronological memories become a "Tunnel of Love", the soundtrack to part of the episode and Jonathan's idea of Angela's favourite song, which it becomes following their conversation, driving Angela through a linear, but affective, corridor towards affect/love.

This organisation of information, specifically affective self performances, around a singular demand is reminiscent of Young's description of the digital alter ego (2020). Young posits

that shapeshifting is one the superpowers of data. The replication of a user's self changes shape according to the system that puts it together and for what purpose. Similarly, Jonathan's virtual self, as information, changes shape according to the purpose for which it is required. Jonathan's shape does not just change for Angela in this narrativisation of his life, he also takes a different material form which highlights the non-existence of his self before or outside of Angela's demand for his organisation.

Following a compilation of relevant clips from previous episodes, where Laurie Blake is shown explaining "people who wear masks are driven by trauma," and Angela is seen calling Cal "Jon", we are shown a long Vietnamese street, recognisable from Angela's memories in previous episodes (*Watchmen:* A God walks into Abar, 2019). A mural of Dr Manhattan is painted above a bar and the street is full of discarded items from the earlier "Victory in Vietnam" day festival, including blue banners and masks representing Dr Manhattan. Jonathan appears in the centre of the street, calmly walking towards the bar. We only see Jonathan from behind, and then a close up of his hands as he picks up a mask from the floor and places it on his face. Whilst we never see his face, Jonathan's blue face and hands are telltale signs that it is him – the nuclear accident that led him to be Dr Manhattan also turned him blue.

The covering of Jonathan's face with an identical mask suggests the alienation of self. The mask is a way of taking anonymity, of alienation yourself from any markers of identity to take on others. Jonathan takes on his own identity. The production of self for capital purposes, also recognised in the festival items that have been sold only to be discarded in the street, alienates even the authentic self from the individual, producing a separation between the individual and the experiences that they recognise as theirs as they are always having to consider the capital potential and affective power of these experiences as they can be turned, in narrative or image form, into performances that others can engage with, just as Jonathan narrates him self for Angela.

The obscuration of Johnathan's face continues for much of the episode. This is largely achieved through camera angles and mise-en-scene, as various objects obscure only Johnathan's face – alerting us to the conscious decision to do so. Considering that the face

acts as a signifier of the self and emotion, particularly in visual media as it is often our only path into the minds of characters, the absence of the face seems to indicate Johnathan's lack of self. This is reinforced by the level tone of his voice which barely changes, even through his fight with Angela. Jonathan lacks emotion and selfhood, it is only through his performance to Angela that he can produce self.

This is reinforced in later scenes as Jonathan takes a physical form on Angela's request. During the dinner scene, Angela asks how they would be able to live a normal life, Jonathan explains that she will come up with an "elegant solution" but he cannot tell her what it is or it won't be her idea (*Watchmen:* A God walks into Abar, 2019). This explanation comes either side of the scene demonstrating her "elegant solution", taking a dead body from the morgue of someone who won't be missed. This is a selfless body, one that has no current individual inhabiting it.

Jonathan's face is initially obscured within the scene as he encourages Angela to ask for the body she really wants him to take, "I could actually look like anyone you want, Angela… Whatever form I take is the one you should be comfortable with,", after she presents him with three light-skinned bodies (*Watchmen:* A God walks into Abar, 2019). She finally offers up Calvin Jelani, a Black man. Finally, Jonathan's face is shown, now identical to Calvin's.

Taking Calvin's form is not enough; Jon's omniscience isolates him from Angela, rendering him unable to emotionally or facially respond to her. He is fully relational but only within the realm of his own experiences—a self-contained echo chamber of experience, replicating online forums. Consequently, he chooses to become amnesiac, blocking his powers, including conscious experience of self, and becoming someone else—Calvin in the meantime. This adds an extra layer to Angela's romantic affair, as Calvin is not Jon, but Jon is Calvin in order to placate her and allow them to be together.

The taking of Calvin's form also allows the series to set up its use of Adrian Veidt to emphasise the simulated nature of white people's lived experience as trauma or the adoption of trauma discourse as a means of legitimising privilege. In a complex sequence, Jonathan's experiences as a Jewish child evacuated with his father from Germany to England, to the creation of a paradise for himself on Europa featuring the house and the upper class,

Christian couple that owned it and opened their house to refugees, to the taking of Cal's form and blocking of Jonathan's omniscience.

It is significant here as the trauma and lived experience of Jewish people through WW2 became the catalyst for memory and trauma studies, as well as turning cultural attention on the power of witness, for example, in the war crime court cases against the perpetrators of the Holocaust. This history is passed over as an element of Jonathan's past, rather he focuses on the ability to create life and a home, as he attempts to inspire the same feelings in Angela.

The home that he creates on Europa and the recreated couple speaks to the idea of simulation, allowing adult Johnathan to return to somewhere that is safe, as he is also still a child and experiencing the same memories that the house and couple are based on for the first time. This "paradise" is traded by Johnathan for Veidt's help in blocking his powers for Angela's sake. Jonathan has given up on the utopia he sought to create because his creation's "love is infinite", whereas Veidt wants nothing more than a place where they're "waiting for someone to worship," (*Watchmen:* A God walks into Abar, 2019).

The failure of perfection to fulfil Johnathan hints at an unsatisfaction in comfort and privilege, though Jonathan isn't in this moment judged for it. Veidt's response, to want to go, is the important outcome in this conversation for the rest of the series as it provides context on the scenes that have been interspersed through the rest of the episodes so far. Veidt has been living a difficult life, and killing clones of the loving couple, Adam and Eve, in games and experiments. I will return to this simulated experience in the final section of this chapter.

One comment from Veidt stands out in this section, particularly with Angela's reluctance to suggest Clavin's body as her preferred form for Jonathan to take. Veidt recognises Jonathan straight away despite his new physical form; "Because only Dr Manhattan would have the balls to show up here wearing nothing but his birthday suit." Whilst Jonathan's physical form hides his "true" identity, his self performance, here in not recognising a need for clothes, speaks to his identity more than his physical form could. This suggests, as does the concealment of Jonathan from the viewer in plain sight as Calvin, that the physical form does not mean the self or individual inhabiting it. This is an extension to the series' concern with

physical identity markers being read as individuals' belonging to collective identities.

Angela has already been seen to reject the cycle of trauma that her skin colour indicates she should inherit; here Jonathan's body, similarly Black, does not indicate the person within. The cultural reading of the physical body is inaccurate and places the individual into categories they do not feel they belong to – it was this that the affordance of anonymity initially promised release from.

Veidt goes on to comment on the "interesting" form that Jonathan has taken; "It's not the eighties anymore, Jon. This kind of appropriation is considered quite… problematic now." Veidt also correctly deduces that Jonathan took the form for the sake of a woman. The reference to appropriation reinforces the idea of taking on others' identities for personal gain or trivial enjoyment.

Furthermore, the visual representation of Jonathan's form taking, where Jonathan's face is blocked until the camera turns back to him following a shot of Calvin's face to reveal that he has taken on Calvin's face, mirrors the smooth transformations seen between Will and Angela in their experience of Will's life. This visual parallel connects the idea of alienating the self as a product with the ability of others, particularly powerful people, to take on those experiences and the self performances or identity markers that refer to those experiences.

The idea of a non-Black person somehow making themselves seem Black could reference the racist practice of Blackface where white people would paint their faces black to imitate Black people for the sake of making comedy. However, the full physical appropriation of a Black body is also possible to achieve through online avatars and game characters. This further accentuates the theme of assuming the selves of others.

Moreover, Jonathan has taken this form for his own gain, that of a romantic and sexual relationship with Angela. In Jonathan's transformation and Veidt's commentary on appropriation, the narrative raises important questions about the ethics and implications of assuming another person's identity, particularly in relation to race, highlighting the complexities and potential consequences of such actions.

The extreme violence in the final scene of the previous episode, where Angela's face gets

covered in blood as she approaches Calvin with a hammer and bashes apart his skull, is finally explained as a way to remove the device that blocks Johnathan's powers and awareness. However, the violence, much like in *Westworld* (2016-2022), also represents another alienation of self, this time Calvin's, to return to the perfectly (intra)relational state of Johnathan. The violence also manifests the betrayal the viewer may be expected to feel, both of themselves and Calvin, through the concealment of his "true" identity, destruction of this version of Johnathan, and of course, Angela's romantic betrayal in her affair with Crawford.

Overall, Jonathan serves as *Watchmen*'s (2019) vehicle for exploring the affordance of anonymity, selflessness, and the ability to appropriate others selves, identities, and experiences. Jonathan's adoption of a Black body does not, however, lead to his appropriation of Black lived experience in the series. Unlike Angela, Calvin is not featured exploring his past and connection to generational trauma. Instead, Calvin seeks to spend time with their adopted children and supporting Angela. The little screen time he receives emphasises the simulated nature of this self – Calvin does exist but for Angela and Johnathan, he is merely a cover story.

This exploration of identity, anonymity, and alienated selfhood connects with the Seventh Kavalry's quest to "become blue" and acquire Jonathan's powers. They seek to restore what they perceive as an imbalance of power by asserting white superiority. The episode preceding the revelation of Johnathan's identity reveals the Seventh Kavalry's plan; the episodes reinforce each other's themes of the opportunity for identity appropriation opened by networked neoliberalism's alienation of self.

Seventh Calvary's Quest for White Supremacy

Seventh Kavalry are a white supremacist group that developed from Cyclops, the white supremacist group that aimed to spark racial violence through hypnotic technology. Angela's grandfather Will sacrifices his personal life in his obsession with preventing Cyclops from using their technology. The hypnotic technology is tested in cinemas, suggesting a relationship between the power of visual media and its affectivity.

Seventh Kavalry are always pictured in the series wearing identical masks. These masks are replicas of the masked vigilante, Rorschach's. Rorschach was the only member of Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt and Dr Manhattan/Jonathan Osterman's original masked vigilante group to refuse to keep quiet about Veidt's framing of Dr Manhattan and faking of the giant squid attack. Dr Manhattan killed him for this but Rorschach had already arranged for his journal to be sent to newspapers to reveal the truth. The story was rejected by al but a conspiracy-based magazine and so became a fringe belief. Significantly, the Seventh Kavalry's choice to wear Rorschach masks marks their refusal to believe mainstream ideas. It also provides them with a collective identity as seventh Kavalry, and anonymity, with the many masks acting as one "Rorschach" who cannot be caught.

In the seventh episode of the series, "An Almost Religious Awe", Senator Joe Keene reveals himself to be a member of Seventh Kavalry (*Watchmen,* 2019). Keene has been a recurring character through the series, primarily through his involvement with Laurie Blake, as he ensures she is sent to Tulsa to investigate Chief Crawford's death, and it is he that initially brought in legislation for Tulsa's police officers to wear masks. In their initial meeting, after Laurie accuses Keene of wanting to become president, Keene suggests that the next president could pardon Nite Owl, another masked vigilante who is currently imprisoned and whom Laurie had a relationship with, to ensure she would go to Tulsa. He also thanks Laurie "on behalf of the American taxpayer." Given the later revelation that Keene is part of Seventh Kavalry, and the protests against Redfordations as tax breaks, "equal rights, equal taxes," this is the first sign that Keene is acting for a select group. It also suggests that democracy is dependent upon the flow of capital; the Senator works for tax payers, not those in poverty.

A pivotal scene with Keene ensures, revealing their plan is far bigger than just terrorising Tulsa. This scene, which features Laurie strapped down to a chair while Keene narrates his experience, offers a contrasting perspective to the previously discussed scenes involving Angela and Jonathan. In this analysis, I will explore the significance of this scene, its visual and narrative elements, and its Implications for the portrayal of trauma and power dynamics.

Laurie awakens in a dark warehouse as the camera pans out and down from above her to centre her head in the middle of a graffiti Cyclops symbol on the wall, recognisable from

Will's memories. As she looks around to investigate the scene, we are shown a metal cage being constructed behind her. This emphasises her current restrained state as she is tied to a chair, as Seventh Kavalry members in their masks carry on working around her.

The alignment of her head with the Cyclops image and the cage are both reminiscent of her first meeting with Keene (*Watchmen:* She was Killed by Space Junk, 2019). In that first scene, Laurie's head matches with her own face's placement in a pop art picture of her and her three colleagues superhero alter egos, including Dr Manhattan and Nite Owl. In this scene, she also keeps a pet owl under a cover in a cage, referencing the real Nite Owl's imprisonment. Through this capture of Laurie's image, it is suggested that her past self performances are enclosing her–- leading us to her current captured state.

A long shot shows Senator Keene approaching Laurie from behind a pillar, as if he has been waiting for her to awaken (*Watchmen:* An Almost Religious Awe, 2019). Through this beginning part of the scene, we are given close up shots of Laurie's face as she is emotionally expressive in her responses to Keene. In contrast, low angle shots of Keene's face emphasise the power he is supposed to have in this situation. A series of shot-reverse-shots follow as Laurie ridicules Keene;

LAURIE: Oh Jesus, please don't.

KEENE: What?

LAURIE: Talk me through your fucking plan. Let me guess. When you were just a boy, your father took you on his knee and told you that you'd been born into the order of the cyclops and it was your legacy to grow up and be the most powerful racist fuck in the nation.

Laurie's description of what she imagines to be Keene's plan ridicules the trope of villainous monologues. A trope of the superhero genre, at the very least, the supervillain monologue provides detail about their dastardly plan, generally allowing the superhero time to figure out a way to escape their restraints and overcome the supervillain. *Watchmen* (2019), however, continues its dark parody of the superhero genre by lampooning the supervillain monologue. Through Laurie's spiteful tone and description, the monologue is framed as a mere rhetorical

device used to justify the actions of the villain.

Also, Laurie does not even attempt to move, which further mocks the monologue as an opportunity for the superhero to miraculously escape. As Laurie describes, she is “tired of this silliness,” (*Watchmen:* An Almost Religious Awe, 2019). Additionally, the reference to Keene’s “father” and “legacy” belittles the notion of inherited privileged positions due to skin colour, which stands in stark contrast to earlier references to Angela’s inherited cycles of trauma resulting from racism-based violence.

Keene drags a chair slowly toward Laurie, deliberately assuming a comfortable posture that contrasts with Laurie's growing exasperation. This visual contrast highlights their differing motivations and the power dynamics at play. As Keene delivers his monologue, the shot-reverse-shot technique captures Laurie's increasing frustration through eye rolls, head movements, and audible sighs. This scene draws a parallel to the initial meeting between Laurie and Keene and foreshadows the subsequent encounter between Angela and Jonathan, both of which involve the sharing of personal narratives for personal gain.

However, Keene's focus in this moment is on reinforcing the legitimisation of his claim to power, rather than directly affecting anyone. Throughout his explanation, he refers to himself and the Seventh Kavalry as “we”, finally ending on an “I” statement. By predominantly using a plural pronoun, Keene emphasises the collective identity of being “a white man” over his personal identity or motivations.

> KEENE: We’re not racist. We’re about restoring balance in those times when our country forgets the principles upon which it was founded. Because the scales have tipped way too far and it is extremely difficult to be a white man in America right now. So I’m thinking, I might try being a blue one.

During the delivery of his final line, Joe leans in close to Laurie, bringing his face menacingly close to hers while maintaining a calm and composed tone. He deliberately avoids direct eye contact, but the camera swiftly cuts to capture Laurie's shocked expression, sharply contrasting with her earlier exasperation. This moment is intensified by the accompanying

dark rumbling music, including subtle drums, which recurs throughout the series. These drums have been associated with heightened tensions and violent urges, particularly in Angela's episode when she delves into Will's memories. The drums symbolise the deep-seated anger that Will felt as a result of the violence inflicted by white supremacists.

By using the same sounds, the series suggests that Keene is attempting to equate his personal experience with the extreme violence, inequity, inequality, and harm endured by individuals like Will. However, this attempt is undermined by the series' decision not to provide Keene's experiences of privilege loss with screen time, unlike the entire episode dedicated to Will's lived experiences. The connection evoked by the music underscores Keene's attempt to legitimise his actions and provides an emotional cue for the viewer. The emotional cue, coupled with the absence of anger from the characters within the scene, suggests that the series expects the restrained anger and violence to emanate not only from the characters but also from the viewers themselves.

This scene is notable as one of the few instances where the Seventh Kavalry is granted screen time, particularly because their views are expressed here. In previous appearances, the Seventh Kavalry has been shown silently preparing for violence, building bombs while wearing masks. By prioritising screen time to explore racial tensions through the experiences of the Black characters on the show—Angela, Will, and Calvin—the series redirects empathy away from the white supremacists and towards these character’s intersectional lived experiences.

However, it is necessary to examine Keene’s explanation of Seventh Kavalry’s plan and its connection to the other white supremacist action seen in the series. Through this examination, and the complex interplay of Angela and Johnathan’s experiences as alienated selves, the series suggests that networked neoliberalism’s demand for affecting self performances amplifies the value of lived experience as a cultural discourse. This is because the imperative for affecting self performances can draw on lived experience as a rich source for compelling content, capable of galvanising shared identities and experiences for the production of (social) capital. Consequently, the alienation of lived experience through online self-performance exposes it to appropriation, enabling its use as a legitimising narrative for

selfhood, personhood, and the maintenance of power by hegemonic groups.

Keene suggests that “it is extremely difficult to be a white man in America right now,” (*Watchmen:* An Almost Religious Awe, 2019). This evokes real world identity political debates, for example over the experience of a loss of privilege by hegemonic groups, white people, as being felt as traumatic. It is “difficult” because white people, as a collective identity, are being asked to change their behaviour towards other identity groups. This has been seen in the protests and violence of Seventh Kavalry through the series, they refuse the need to treat others with dignity and respect.

Keene does not use emotive language here but the placement of his monologue amongst the colours of Angela-Will’s memories, white and black emphasised by the dark warehouse and flashes of white from welding taking place on the cage, and red marking on the wall for cyclops, and set up of the conversation as an affecting communication, indicates that his is Keene’ narrativisation of his experience to justify or explain his actions through euphemism.

He refuses the label “racist” but acknowledges a desire to put white people back on top, though this is framed as levelling of scales for an unequal position. Furthermore, with the series’ other reference to taking on others it experiences, it suggests that Keene is taking on a victimised position, choosing to see a loss of privilege (though no such loss is featured within the series) as a violence enacted against his identity group, white men.

The reference to taking on others identities is then reinforced as he reveals he “might try being a blue one.” He references Johnathan’s power but through his physical identity marker of blue skin. By taking on Jonathan’s physicality, Keene can take his power and reassert his privileged position.

Due to Keene’s isolated nature within the narrative, only entering because of other people’s stories which again reinforces his need to appropriate others experiences, the true gravity of his words here is not graspable without the context of the other appropriations of identity and experience. In the scene in the final episode of the series, where Keene finally gets to explain his plan to an audience of white supremacists, Laurie and Angela, some of Keene’s final words reinforce the connection between the loss of privilege and the appropriation of the

language of trauma (*Watchmen:* See How They Fly, 2019).

Keene undresses as he sits, emotively addressing the crowd who sit in an abandoned church on pews. Shot-reverse-shots show Keene with his masked back up standing around, and the unmasked audience. White people in smart clothing, nodding along in agreement with Keene's words. One man even purses his lips as his eyes water in his emotional state of recognition with Keene's recounted experiences.

> KEENE: Thirty-four years ago, Adrian Veidt unleashed his monster on the world. No, not his giant one-eyed octopus, but his puppet president. First, he took our guns. And then, he made us say sorry. Over and over again. Sorry. Sorry for the alleged sins of those who died decades before we were born. Sorry for the colour of our skin. All we wanted was to get cops in masks, take some power back, start ourselves a little culture war.

In his speech, Keene strategically frames the reparations and restrictions on violence as traumatic and oppressive. With a solemn tone that rises and falls to emphasise the word "sorry'" Keene attempts to evoke a sense of collective victimhood. Keene's manipulation of emotions and the repetition of' "sorry" taps into the idea of narrating lived experience for the affective power that it holds in a society that demands effective self performance.

Keene's emotional speech is quickly undone by his comic explosion within the machine that is supposed to transfer Johnathan's power to him. Whilst the white supremacist group is certainly set up as a losing side for which the viewer should have little sympathy, the repetition of "sorry" here evokes ideas of the lack of agency we have over others in our culturally assigned collective identities. As Keene describes, these white people feel that they must be "Sorry for the alleged sins of those who died decades before we were born. Sorry for the colour of our skin," because of the collective identities their bodies are read as belonging to (*Watchmen:* See How They Fly, 2019).

In the ancillary storyline, we encounter Adrian Veidt's experiences in the paradise provided by Johnathan, which further supports the interpretation of Keene's plan as a warning about the

simulation of lived experience to legitimise particular selfhoods over others.

Veidt's simulated traumas and the trivialisation of lived experience

Adrian Veidt’s storyline serves as a compelling example of the themes of appropriation and simulated lived experience as a means to maintain power. Throughout the series, glimpses of Veidt's life are presented without immediate context, leaving viewers intrigued until the penultimate episode when the truth behind his actions is finally unveiled. While viewers familiar with the *Watchmen* comics or the 2009 film may have some prior knowledge of Veidt's activities, others may piece together the puzzle as the show progresses as the background to the series is referenced throughout.

For instance, the series' opening scene and initial marketing depict a rainfall of small alien squid-like creatures onto traffic. Later in the series, when Jonathan visits Veidt's residence, the viewers are shown his laboratory, where he grows baby squids and employs a meteorological teleporter to produce rainstorms. Additional background details were also provided through online content released alongside the series, aiding viewers in understanding Veidt's association with simulated traumatic events.

It is crucial to acknowledge that while the threats associated with Veidt's plans are not real, the traumatic effects they produce are. The opening scene of an early episode focuses on Angela’s colleague, Looking Glass/Wade Tillman’s, foundational trauma during the original squid attack in 1985, from which he develops his alter ego. As a teenage boy, he goes on a mission with his church to New Jersey to warn people of impending nuclear annihilation. He approaches a gang on the street, dressed in leather, and attempts to speak with them and give them leaflets. They harass him until one of them, a girl, defends him and leads him off to the nearby hall of mirrors. The girl runs off with his clothes after convincing him to get naked and have a sexual liaison with her if he believes it is the end of the world. This embarrassment is quickly ruptured by a horrendous sound, a loud bang and ringing of Wade’s ears as the glass around him shatters and hurts him. He rushes outside, with his hands still over his ears to discover everyone outside is dead.

This scene gains further clarity through Angela's visits to Wade's bunker and Laurie's

analysis of his costume. Wade's experience not only serves as a reminder of the physical consequences of Veidt's simulated violence but also underscores the profound psychological effects it has on individuals. The landing of the squid sent a psychic shockwave through New York and beyond, killing millions. The psychic nature of the blast reinforces a connection between the virtual or mental and the physical.

Wade's anxiety-induced actions, such as wearing the mirrored mask of his alter ego, Looking Glass, highlight the complex connection between the virtual or mental and the physical realms. The Looking Glass mask that conceals psychic dampening material protecting his mind from psychic influence. This is a symbolic reference to the trope of representing anxious conspiracy theorists protecting their mind from networked technology and surveillance with tin foil hats. This juxtaposition of physical and mental dimensions amplifies the examination of the material consequences and affective impact of Veidt's simulated violence.

By simulating threats to ensure global peace, Veidt demonstrates his willingness to prioritise his values and intelligence over the lived experiences of others. I use simulated here as the attacks do not issue from an extraterrestrial threat or Dr Manhattan as Veidt would have people believe. Veidt simulates these threats to ensure world peace, but they have other material consequences. Veidt thereby is shown to prioritise his values and intelligence over the lived experience of others as he is happy to inflict violence for the mathematical equation of utility to his goal. His ethical choices, rooted in the calculation of utility to achieve his goals, raise profound moral questions. Veidt's character exemplifies the power dynamics at play throughout the series, where the appropriation of lived experiences and the orchestration of simulated events become tools for maintaining dominance and control.

This narrative of power dynamics resonates with the themes explored in *Westworld* (2016-2022), albeit with different emphases. *Westworld* (2016-2022) looked at class-based dynamics and multiplicity of selves in its third season. Preceding this, *Westworld* (2016-2022) portrayed simulated stories being used in the park as a means for producing affect and harvesting data. Moreover, *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) androids used their lived experience as proof of their selfhood, their suffering as part of the legitimation of their action and claim to

rights. In contrast, *Watchmen* (2019) uses the same themes of simulation, multiplicity and identity-based power dynamics but to tell a different story, one of the appropriation of legitimising discourses to maintain power.

Veidt's superpower is his intelligence. Whilst his intelligence is bent towards achievements that cannot be recognised by others or else it would destroy the effect he has tried so hard to make. Ironically, this captures the wish fulfilment applied to superheroes by critics such as Fingeroth. Superheroes are supposed to encapsulate how people want to be recognised as more than they are in specific social arenas. For example, if people at work "only knew" what other qualities a person had. It is an idea of frustration at not being able to be your whole self at work, restricted by the desirable or allowable self performances for that social arena. For Veidt, he can be intelligent but his mastery of social dynamics, such that he can manipulate the world and maintain peacetime, cannot be recognised or his sucess would be broken. The lie only works so long as no one realises it is a lie.

The idea that Veidt is successful is, of course, subjective. Veidt is obsessed with maintaining world peace through his violent events. However, while he remains committed to this path, instances of racism-motivated violence continue, as seen in Tulsa. This raises a crucial question: peace for whom? Veit prioritises maintenance of global power dynamics. In fact, he sends a message to the president, allowing him to retain the truth behind the events and remain in power, even giving suggestions about how to proceed.

The scene revealing that Veidt sent this video comes after Senator Keene's revelation of the Seventh Kavalry's plans. At this point, the Seventh Kavalry has also captured Wade, though he is not physically restrained. Wade is invited to watch the video which is played across multiple older, box-style television screens arranged against a wall. The repetitive nature of Veidt's direct address to the camera within the confined, dimly lit space creates an impression of brainwashing, despite the freedom to watch or leave. A partially drawn curtain to Wade's right reveals the cage being constructed by the Seventh Kavalry, revealing his proximity to Laurie and Keene during their discussion.

By placing Wade as the viewer's focal point during the revelation of the video, the audience is prompted to connect his traumatic experiences with Veidt's manipulation. Wade emerges

as a conduit for empathy in the series, with his mirrored mask embodying the idea of the self passing through others for recognition. The video from Veidt allows Wade to recognise his own experiences and process them; he does not put his reflective mask back on following his viewing of the video. Wade proves to be instrumental in Laurie's escape as he pretends to side with Seventh Kavalry but despite the revelation that his experience was caused by Veidt rather than a real threat, he has no wish to turn against other humans. He reflects others' affectivity back to them, not engaging in collective identities such as Seventh Kavalry.

Moreover, Wade is Veidt's reflection; selfless rather than self-obsessed. Wade is Veidt's antithesis and his actions and responses, including supporting Angela and Laurie in their investigations, stand in opposition to Veidt's self-aggrandising agenda. Wade is also portrayed as less intelligent, in comparison to Veidt's superintelligence, exemplified by his being tricked by the girl in New Jersey, Veidt insulting him as an "ignorant hayseed", his deliberate slowness in voice, and his preoccupation with the bunker and anxious preparations. Thereby, Wade serves as the viewer's connection between Keene/Seventh Kavalry's motives and Veidt's simulated violence.

Much like Keene, Veidt seeks to maintain the balance of power in a specific direction as he believes that the preservation of power dynamics ultimately upholds world peace. While Wade serves as a contrasting figure to Veidt, embodying selflessness and standing against his self-obsessed nature, other ancillary characters, such as Lady Trieu, provide a deeper understanding of Veidt's flaws. The ignorance and bigotry that undermines Veidt's intelligence is revealed in Lady Trieu's backstory and further cements the comparison between Veidt and white supremacist ideology.

The opening of the series finale shows Veidt recording his message to the president (*Watchmen:* See How They Fly, 2019). We slowly zoom out from a camera lens, slowly allowing the Vietnamese man behind the camera to come into focus. A jump cut reveals another man behind him, swapping giant cue cards for Veidt to read from. Another jump cut pulls back to reveal more Vietnamese men, standing around with filming and sound equipment, all in identical clothes, highlighting their lack of individuality within this scene while Veidt lays out his plans for the future events that will lead to the film being needed. The

camera continues to show the back of Veidt's head through this scene, keeping our attention of his staff. Veidt continues to monologue as the men remain silent, one coughs and Veidt must begin his sentence again. The visual juxtaposition of Veidt's authority and the uniformity of his Vietnamese staff hints at his ignorance of their actions and intelligence.

A jump cut transitions to a woman pushing a cleaning trolley, wearing the same outfit as the other Vietnamese workers but with distinctive glasses. She wears big glasses but the same outfit as the other Vietnamese workers. The camera then smoothly follows her, keeping our focus on her as she moves through the halls of Veidt's base to his office. She looks around and then at the camera as she closes the doors to conceal her actions.

Inside the office, the camera focuses on an Ozymandias/Veidt action figure sitting on Veidt's desk. The woman unlocks Veidt's computer, revealing a safe behind the large painting behind the desk. It contains a sample of Veidt's sperm. The woman recites experiences in Vietnamese, ending on "Remove the yoke of slavery. I will not bend my back to be a slave," (*Watchmen:* See How They Fly, 2019). The scene implies that Veidt's treatment of his staff is akin to slavery, exploiting their labour while denying their individuality. This also evokes ideas of mastery, the mastery over other people's agency and selves. This portrayal highlights the racial violence and collective identity themes present in the series.

As the woman speaks, she retrieves a sperm sample and sets up an impregnation device, turning the chair to sit and look at the portrait as she injects the sperm into herself and says, in English, "Fuck you Ozymandias." The shocking use of English demonstrates that she and her colleagues understand Veidt's language, despite his, and perhaps the viewer's, assumption of their limited comprehension due to their race. This further reinforces Veidt's ignorance and his tendency to miss crucial information.

In the subsequent scene, it is revealed that the woman who impregnated herself is Bian My, Lady Trieu's mother. Trieu approaches Veidt at his Antarctic base to ask for help in her mission. He refuses, pointing out that he got rid of his own parent's wealth so he could make something of himself for himself. This idea plays into neoliberalism as Veidt had to work at making his own way in the world. However, his refusal to help Lady Trieu despite her very different position calls attention to his ignorance of his own privilege. He was still an

intelligent white man in a world that was systemically in his favour, offering opportunities and connections even without his parents specific wealth.

On the other hand, Lady Trieu has already had to make something of herself to get to where his base is. She is a woman and mixed race, indicating that she will experience more challenges than Veidt due to systemic inequality and inequity. Veidt ignores these differences, continuing to remain self-obsessed rather than identifying with a familial connection.

Through these examples, the paragraph effectively conveys Veidt's racial ignorance and bigotry, showcasing his disregard for his Vietnamese staff's actions, intelligence, and individuality. The contrast with ancillary characters like Lady Trieu highlights the extent of Veidt's flaws and his alignment with white supremacist ideologies.

The interspersal of scenes from Veidt's time on Europa add to the combination of simulated experience and white supremacist ideologies. As they initially lack the context of Veidt's identity or location, the scenes of Veidt's experiences on Europa are confusing. They progress from plays to experiments to the avoidance of the "Game Warden", a masked character that eventually captures Veidt and holds a year long court case to determine Veidt's guilt in the murder of the various clones. The progression of events seems to get steadily darker yet Veidt treats it as a game, as it is later revealed to be. His only defence in the year-long trial is one egregious fart.

The many servants in this paradise, Ms. Crookshanks and Mr. Phillips, are all clones of the lord and lady of the manor that Johnathan and his father took refuge in as they came to England during the second world war. This connection, along with the cremation of one of the Mr Phillips during the play in a rectangular box, links the traumas experienced by Jewish people during the Holocaust with Veidt's trivialisation of lived experience. In this sacred location that represents Johnathan's attempt to make his own Eden, Veidt trivialises life itself, murdering clone after clone for his own amusement in intellectually satisfying ways, i.e. through the retelling of Johnathan's life in play form or by catapulting the clones through the atmospheric bubble that protects the paradise on Europa.

The progression of events on Europa gets steadily darker, yet Veidt treats it as a game, revealing the depth of his ignorance and detachment from the consequences of his actions. The multiplicity of the clones is unusual in that they still have some resemblance to the human life cycle. They are grown in the pond which acts as a giant womb. When Veidt removes them from the lake, they have no understanding, no language, only love in their hearts and a will to serve or worship. Arguably, this could represent multiple forms of nascent AI in our networked world, be it simple online bots or the use of similar responsive AI to run non-player characters in video games, an allusion reinforced by the figure of the Game Warden. This depiction raises questions about the ethics and implications of AI development.

However, the allusion to videogames also evokes ideas of simulated or vicarious experience. In video games, we are put in the role of a character with a different life. The same visual strategies are used to present self performances in networked spaces by other human and nonhuman entities. It is only our understanding of video games that prevents us from logically recognising nonplayer characters as selves, they can still be affectively moving.

Furthermore, Veidt's game storyline on Europa operates as a separate timeline, running parallel to Angela's unfolding events. It spans multiple years and culminates in Veidt’s rescue before the events depicted in the series. Veidt’s simulated paradise is ironically triggered by an event tied to bodily importance: sex. The created humans on Europa, unable to reproduce, exist as endlessly replicated Adam and Eve figures who start as children in adult bodies, lacking self-development and driven solely by their assigned roles. They treat Veidt as their master, further highlighting the power dynamics and Veidt’s ignorance of his privilege.

The lack of desire displayed by the clones and their willingness to fulfil any role assigned by Veidt suggests parallels with *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) androids. Veidt effectively scripts their identities, directing them not toward financial capital reproduction or affectivity, but toward utility. They serve the purpose of reinforcing Veidt’s own self-image and intelligence. They are a darker interpretation of the multiplicity of self performances in that none of them have selves but still take on roles, their performances continue to indicate no organising principle that could stand for self. This is emphasised by the Game Warden who has the longest

lifespan and thereby the most developed character. He contrasts with the other clones in his ability to express emotion in his voice and to express profound opinions. However, the court scene undermines this presentation of self as he sincerely discusses the case with a pig, referring to it as “Madam” to settle the matter of Veidt’s guilt (*Watchmen:* An Almost Religious Awe, 2019). This striking illogical act questions the link between intelligence, self performance and self.

The year-long trial and two year digging out of the prison cell that Veidt is then seen to undertake is a simulated hardship. Veidt could merely command the clones to do something different but he continues with this experience to pass the time as he has calculated when Trieu’s satellite will reach Europa and he can send a message to ask for help getting home. Veidt then continues to trivialise lived experience by choosing to experience hardship for entertainment’s sake.

The series ends with a conclusion that reasserts the power of lived experience and trauma over the trivial, vicarious experience of simulated hardship. Laurie and Wade help Veidt to make a frozen alien squid storm to destroy Lady Trieu’s machine (*Watchmen:* See How They Fly, 2019). By this point, Jonathan is dead, having been killed by Keene to absorb his powers, which resulted instead in Keene’s death as Trieu had rigged the machine. Trieu was prevented from taking Johnathan’s power for herself by the frozen squid storm, which kills her as well as destroying her machine. Wade assists Laurie in arresting Veidt who initially thinks he will avoid justice as there is no proof of his involvement. However, Wade reveals that he took a copy of the video that Veidt sent to the president and thereby they do have proof. Here, Wade, representing empathy, triumphs over Veidt’s selfishness.

Conclusion

Watchmen (2019) portrays the potential implications of a world where the value of self is in its power to affect and affected. Through the character of Angela and her encounters with her grandfather's memories, the show suggests that the alienation of self through online self-performances opens the door to vicarious experiences. This connection between Angela's re-experience of Will’s memories and networked technology gains further strength with the

utilisation of microchips to harvest and encapsulate his experiences in a pill—a tangible symbol representing the reduction of the self to mere information.

This is an intriguing parallel to the portrayal of data harvesting technologies in *Westworld* (2016-2022), where smooth camera movements seamlessly navigate scenes and locations, mirroring the pervasive presence of such movements in this particular episode of *Watchmen* (2019). In *Westworld* (2016-2022), the android host's data is held in the Pearl housed in their skulls–- a smooth opalescent sphere that vividly represents the reduction of selfhood to binary information. The smoothness contrasts with the expected textures of the complex brain. Additionally, *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) guests' data is archived in a server, visually represented as a library filled with books files containing perforated sheets, like those employed by the mechanical organ in the tavern and opening titles–- another replication of experience and aspects of selves through the collection of affective data. This repeated use of mise-en-scene to symbolise the capture of lived experiences exemplifies its alienation, the gap between the physical individual and their self performances is made concrete.

Moreover, the treatment that extricates Angela from her re-experiencing of her own and her grandfather's memories establishes a connection to posthuman concepts of permeable boundaries and alternative self models. The act of purging the Nostalgia from Angela's blood, accomplished by channelling it through an elephant, draws on the cultural association between elephants and memory to explore the equivalence of human selfhood with animal consciousness.

Resonating with the ideas put forth by media theorist Alison Landsberg, the episode underscores the ability of media to generate prosthetic identities that can be assumed and discarded while still resonating as authentic experiences. This notion is further accentuated by the camera's fluid movement during Angela's memory episode, seamlessly transitioning between Angela and Will as the different actors embody the character, ultimately merging their distinct selves into a singular space.

The act of superheroes donning and shedding their costumes, a recurring motif witnessed in Angela-Will's actions throughout the episode, epitomises the replacement of one self with another. Will's harsh removal of the costume from his son, angered by his son's engagement

with his violent alter ego, reinforces this transferal of selfhood as one consisting of ideological values as well as experiences. Through these examples, *Watchmen* (2019) astutely portrays how networked neoliberalism reinforces our capacity to assimilate others' experiences as our own, as the affordances and aesthetics of the web erode the boundaries between our encounters with our own self-performances and those of others.

Building upon the exploration of Angela's experiences, *Watchmen* (2019) introduces another perspective through the character of Johnathan, who embodies the ultimate form of the user. Jonathan's superpowers, which emulate the user's freedom and control over online content, serve as a metaphor for the inherently relational nature of the user's position. The relationality I refer to here is not just in the shaping of our identities and experiences by the dynamic interactions and relationships formed within digital spaces, it is the nature of these interactions composition from content and self performances that are intended to affect and be affected. The movement of affect is a relation; it connects disparate entities and is forever in the inbetween. In contrast to Angela's introspective encounters, the lengthy conversation between Jonathan and Angela highlights the ability to organise experiences based on their affective resonances.

However, while *Watchmen* (2019) explores the profound relationality of the user, it also raises concerns about the potential pitfalls of networked neoliberalism. Within this framework, the user is often driven to prioritise the representation of their image over genuine self-exploration and personal growth. Networked neoliberalism encourages users to focus on external validation and the construction of carefully curated online personas, which can foster a culture of narcissism and surface-level interactions. This shift towards performative self-presentation risks overshadowing any idea of an authentic self, including one's skills, personality traits, and genuine lived experiences.

This is further supported by *Watchmen*'s (2019) use of Adrian Veidt's games and Senator Joe Keene's speech to his white supremacist supporters. With these character's storylines, *Watchmen* (2019) highlights a tendency of hegemonic identity groups to interpret their experiences as hardships, as Keene frames his supporter's experience of being asked to say sorry. Moreover, *Watchmen* (2019) suggests that hegemonic groups simulate suffering for

their own enjoyment, as seen in Veidt’s character arc.

Watchmen (2019) sets the stage with these potentials but goes further to suggest that the elevation of lived experience as a claim for selfhood, as promoted within the networked neoliberal imperatives for visible and influential self-performances, becomes a discourse of legitimisation that is susceptible to appropriation by hegemonic groups. This appropriation is facilitated, in part, by the notion of prosthetic identities, where discourses and affects can freely circulate, detached from the embodied experiences that originally produced them.

Watchmen (2019) uses the backdrop of racial tensions to explore these potential ramifications to the continuing safety of minority groups' claims to selfhood, rights, and a life free of oppression. By intertwining the exploration of digital self-performances with the portrayal of racial struggles, the show highlights how the pursuit of selfhood and rights within a networked neoliberal framework intersects with issues of systemic oppression and discrimination.

The digital realm, with its emphasis on visibility and affect, provides both opportunities and risks for marginalised communities. While it allows for the amplification of voices and the mobilisation of collective action, it also exposes these experiences to potential co-optation and dilution. The ability of hegemonic groups to appropriate and reshape the narratives of marginalised communities within the networked space raises critical concerns about the continuing safety and empowerment of these groups.

Watchmen's thought-provoking exploration urges us to critically examine the power dynamics inherent in the networked neoliberal paradigm. It prompts us to reflect on how the discourses of selfhood, as constructed and performed within digital environments, can influence the struggles for recognition, rights, and a life free from oppression for minority communities. By scrutinising these potentials, *Watchmen* (2019) invites us to consider the complex interplay between digital identities, social justice, and the ongoing fight for equality.

In this final section, I shall further explore the concept of the legitimisation of selfhood through lived experience. Throughout the last century and beyond, the trauma and suffering experienced by marginalised groups, that hold a collective identities in part due to the way

that their visual, physiological identity markers are read by society, have been used to galvanise the challenging and dismantling the dominant humanist paradigm that centres around white, affluent cisgender males as the ideal representation of self and personhood. These civil movements have faced significant contestation and opposition.

However, the rise of networked neoliberalism and its emphasis on the commodification of lived experiences has presented a unique challenge. When our lived experiences, rich with affect, are evaluated based on their potential to generate capital, a hierarchy of experiences and identities begins to emerge. The most emotionally impactful content or lived experiences are prioritised as long as they drive user engagement. Any and all user data is useful for the production of surplus value so long as the users are interacting with content.

Therefore, the poignant reflection that *Watchmen* (2019) offers in its dark iteration of the superhero genre is that the hierarchy of lived experiences and affective content is reinforcing a corresponding hierarchy of selfhood and identity. Collective identities, as *Watchmen* (2019) suggests, can wield more power within this hierarchy than individual identities due to the heightened affective resonance of ideologies. For example, Seventh Kavalry's anonymous individual's act as a group due to their recognition of shared values. The use of masks in their scenes highlights their refusal of individual identities, and individual accountability, instead deferring to the collective identity that the assemblage of individuals produces.

Moreover, Will and Angela's collective identity in the reading of their bodies as belonging to the category Black, serves to unify them. This is demonstrated in both Angela's episode re-experiencing Will's memories and in their reunion at the end of the series.

By providing a visual representation of these dynamics, *Watchmen* (2019) offers us an opportunity to critically reflect on the consequences of the hierarchical valuation of lived experiences and affective content. In its capacity as a dark interpretation and satire of the superhero genre, *Watchmen* (2019) calls into question previous iteration's reliance on the grammars of trauma as a defining feature of their protagonists' characterisation. In thesis' previous case studies, the actions of Iron Man, Jessica Jones, and the ensemble cast of androids in *Westworld* (2016-2022), were explained through continuing traumas of different kinds. The establishment of the characters' selves, and even the revelation of androids'

development of selfhood through self-awareness, revolved around repeated traumatic or violent events, often linked to specific aspects of their identities. For Iron Man, this is a contest of control over his image: For Jessica Jones and *Westworld's* (2016-2022) androids, this is violence enacted against the self due to physical aspects of identity such as gender, race, or species.

Watchmen (2019) challenges the unquestioning use of trauma in these narratives, prompting us to question how the superhero genre reinforces the equivalence of trauma and lived experience with selfhood. It compels us to reflect on how the hierarchy of lived experiences shapes our understanding of selfhood and identity, and how the genre contributes to the perpetuation of existing power structures.

By shedding light on these issues, *Watchmen* (2019) invites us to reassess the narrative frameworks that underpin the superhero genre. It urges us to consider alternative approaches that do not rely solely on trauma as a means of character development, but instead foster a more nuanced exploration of lived experiences and their role in shaping identity. For example, following Wade's character arc reveals the potentials of empathy to shape social connections and to oppose the removal of marginalised groups' agency and personhood. Wade continues to assist both Laurie and Angela due to his idea of the social good, the immediate good that one can do in the interactions with others around them. In considering alternative functions for the elevation of affect, which is embodied with Wade in the form of empathy, we can strive for a more inclusive and empowering representation of diverse identities and experiences within the genre, ultimately challenging the maintenance of existing power structures.

Furthermore, *Watchmen* (2019) employs allusions to contemporary US politics to assert that the threat of hierarchical lived experience and selfhood being used to maintain hegemonic groups power is not just a potential of networked neoliberalism but an active mechanism of content production. During the release of *Watchmen* (2019), racial tensions were at the forefront of cultural concerns, and the series itself emerged as a product of these very concerns. *Watchmen*'s (2019) portrayal of white politicians and powerful figures' willingness to appropriate the language of trauma and hardship to galvanise public support and

adoration reflects the willingness of Donald Trump and other right wing, in particular, politicians and media personalities to construct post-truth narratives that make claim to victimisation in perceived slights or “witch hunts” against their political ideologies.

This leads to a far greater question; if lived experiences are to be the measure of selfhood, how does one judge the legitimacy of claims of trauma and suffering? Networked neoliberalism enables the use of power to affect and be affected as a method of evaluating claims of suffering. However, the prosthetic and transferable nature of identities, experiences, and the discourses and aesthetic components that make up these self performances leave the validation of these affecting performances open to subjective interpretation. In *Watchmen* (2019), for instance, Senator Keene is shown giving an emotional speech, affecting his audience as shown in their tearful faces. However, the suffering he describes pertains to the loss of privilege. While I hold my personal beliefs, this thesis’ analysis alone leaves open the question of how, or even *if*, claims of suffering can be evaluated. What can be affirmed with certainty is that *Watchmen* (2019) portrays networked neoliberalism as having profound effects on the understanding and definition of selfhood, tilting the balance toward enabling hegemonic groups to re-establish a centring of white affluent cisman identities.

Nevertheless, in the final scenes of *Watchmen* (2019), as frozen alien squid rain from the sky, Will, Angela, and her adopted children seek refuge from the storm in the reconstructed cinema, reminiscent of the place where Will's mother played the piano during the Tulsa Massacre. The implied reconciliation between Will and Angela introduces the possibility of healing and growth through the vicarious experience of other’s lived realities. This suggests that despite the overarching influence of networked neoliberalism, there remains potential for transformative connections and collective resilience.

In summary, *Watchmen* (2019) elegantly employs allusions to contemporary politics, raises questions about the legitimacy of claims of suffering, and underscores the impact of networked neoliberalism on selfhood. However, amidst the tumultuous landscape, the series hints at the potential for redemption and personal growth through empathetic engagement with diverse lived experiences.

Chapter 8: What's next?

This thesis has unveiled the superhero genre's representation of web affordances and their potential impacts on the construction and conceptualisation of the self. Throughout the thesis, I have explored the affects associated with networked neoliberalism effect on self as being framed as anxiety and traumatic stress. However, I have also suggested that the superhero genre's representation of these affects often aligns with the imperative to generate affective content, fulfilling the networked neoliberalism's need for continuous user interaction to sustain capital flow.

Furthermore, the superhero genre's representational strategies have been seen to adapt to the increasing naturalisation of both ubiquitous mobile networked technology and the proliferating dimensions of capital production through ancillary web structures, such as data harvesting mechanisms. This has been revealed to be primarily through narrative focus and cinematographic strategies such as the free movement of the camera through scenes to suggest the movement of users through virtual spaces.

The thesis demonstrated that the superhero genre uses a unique combination of formal features to produce an idea of the virtual spaces in which the user predominantly resides. However, it also uses superimposition to redirect the assumption of the effects of the web being restricted to the virtual, online world by overlaying information highways on physical locations. This is supported by the use of the form of episodes and series in particular to replicate the suffusion of our lives with overwhelming amounts of information and interconnectivity with other entities.

Overall, this thesis has demonstrated that the superhero genre is a rich cultural artefact to reflect upon to understand our complex relationship with networked technology, capital and selfhood. By understanding how this commercially successful genre constructs and influences notions of selfhood, we can use the superhero genre as a focal point to engage in critical conversations about power, representation, and social dynamics afforded by the web. Moreover, the superhero can be seen to be a figuration of the user's relationships with the

paradoxical power implications of web affordances; enabling the user's self-expression whilst shaping their performance of self to match the capital and affect based priorities of the web.

New horizons and next steps

Following the conclusion of Marvel's Infinity Saga and the close of a decade of superhero films and television shows exploring our conception of self in networked neoliberalism, there were two potential directions for the continuing production of the genre.

Firstly, the superhero genre could have leant into the empathetic potentials of networked neoliberalism, expanding on the presentation of alternative self models to support and encourage the exploration of posthuman experiences that the affordances of networked media allow. This direction has partly been followed in the genre's current focus on multiverses and alternate timelines. The theme of multiplicity reinforces the decentralisation of identity and historical truth, as well as the anxious production of self performances to remain visible (Bucher 2012). For example, the latest iterations of the Marvel Cinematic Universe focus on the divergence of the world from a linear timeline that maintains peace, introduced in the *Loki* television series (2021-2023), to a multiplicity of worlds where characters meet many versions of themselves and their enemies.

Dr Strange and the Multiverse of Madness (2022) is an interesting development in this theme of multiplicity. Dr Strange and Scarlet Witch both face off against versions of themselves that hold opposing values to the versions of the characters that the MCU's wider storylines follow. This separation of opposing values into two separate bodies subverts the conventional homospatiality of the superhero's multiple identities and their values. The development is particularly interesting when taken into consideration with the evolution of the superhero genre's representational strategies towards increasingly smooth representations of virtual space. There is a possibility that these multiplicities represent the next stage in the superhero genre's interplay with the user's relationship with networked technology as alternate self performances are displayed as having agency of their own, and the ability to be encountered by the user in unusual contexts.

I would argue that this multiplicity also arises in part due to the neoliberal moral implications

of choice (Hall and O'Shea 2013). Multiple timelines allow for the exploration of alternative choices, with the overwhelming information base and hyperconnectivity with other individuals afforded through networked media preventing the user from escaping the (im)moral effects of their individual choices.

The other possible direction of the superhero genre is to revert to unitary understandings of the self and ignore the warnings of its dark parodies such as *Watchmen* (2019) and *Hunters* (2020-2023). Instead, the genre could reinforce the link between the narration of lived experience as a legitimising claim for any actions, including the retention of rights and power. This, unfortunately, currently appears to be the dominant trend of superhero media. For example, many of the recent MCU releases focus on the rehabilitation of supervillains, like *Loki* (2021-2023), or providing apologisms for superheroes gone bad, like Hawkeye who spent a lot of time in the end of MCU's Phase 3 hunting down and killing gang members of non-white ethnicities (*Hawkeye* 2021).

Whilst the superhero genre's apparent rejection of continuing to explore alternative forms of selfhood and affective collectives is disappointing, the specific context in which the next trends of genre arose provide a compelling argument for further critical engagement with the genre following this thesis' demonstration of its representation of networked neoliberal selfhood.

2020-2022 saw the many nations in lockdown and social restrictions in national responses to the coronavirus pandemic. As another crisis point, this response to pandemic conditions was seen to exacerbate inequities already present within Western society. The continuing effects of the social restrictions during this period have provoked debates around institutional responsibility and failings, particularly in terms of health and education systems, as well as competing narratives over the benefits and harms of working from home.

During social restrictions, the web provided a safe social arena, with many companies moving their labour force online so that they could continue to produce capital. There is no doubt that these massive changes in our working conditions have inspired changes in our relationship with networked media. Therefore, the next wave of superhero genre films and television series offer an opportunity to examine and reflect on what these changes could

possibly mean for how we perceive agency, identity, and selfhood.

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