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Abstract

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is one of the most influential and profitable media franchises in the world, producing over 20 films and grossing over \$22.5 billion at the global box office. Even so, the stories and characters reflect a white, heterosexual patriarchal society by repeatedly pushing women and other marginalized identities to the periphery. This essay seeks to expose and analyze the hegemonic power that the MCU's massive content repertoire imposes on its viewers by analyzing the misogynistic treatment of the character Black Widow in *The Avengers* series. Through the application of Laura Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and the concept of postfeminism one can see the consequences of the "male gaze" and capitalistic greed. As a part of a growing media conglomerate, the cultural influence of the MCU extends far beyond theatre walls and thus should be held accountable for the oppressive ideologies it perpetuates.

“*She’s Got Help*’ : A Feminist Approach to The Marvel Cinematic Universe”

The superhero genre, upon its comic origins, is a male invented genre, thus it is no surprise that the storylines and characters are often made by men for men to tell their perspective on the world. Over the decades, and especially in recent years with the rise in popularity of superhero films, comic writers have strived to become more inclusive to non-white, male audiences. However, while for comic writers this may be somewhat true-superhero cinema, a category whose profitability is parallel, is notorious for its misogynistic treatment of women. In fact, Marvel Entertainment, producer of twenty-two (and growing) superhero films over the course of the last 10 years, is one of the biggest offenders. By looking at their first female superheroine, Black Widow, one can see that Marvel uses the concept of the “male gaze” and poor writing to objectify women, devalue their roles as fully fleshed characters and shamelessly profit off of water-downed “feminism.”

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a superhero based media franchise that encompasses film, television and streaming content. Marvel Entertainment has made numerous films prior to 2008, but these are not considered part of the “canon” of the new MCU. Since MCU launch in 2008, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has grossed more than 22.55 billion U.S. dollars in worldwide ticket sales, and its highest-grossing film, *Avengers: Endgame*, earned about \$2,790,216,193 and shattered other records in the Hollywood box office (Steele). The profitability of the Marvel franchise plays a critical role in the creation and perpetuation of negative gender roles in its films. This role takes the form postfeminism.

Postfeminism is “a process by which popular culture ‘undoes’ feminism while appearing to offer a well-intentioned response to it” (Joffe 7). Postfeminism assumes that society is past the need for feminism, glossing over realities of socio-economic distinctions that contradict this assumption. Robyn Joffe explains that, “White and middle class by default, [postfeminism is] anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self” (7).

Once again it should be noted that the component most important to the development and perpetuation of postfeminist ideals, the fuel behind its flame, is capitalism. Companies have ultimately succeeded in convincing middle class white women that they can reach a sense of empowerment by embracing stereotypical definitions of femininity, usually through the consumption of material products (i.e. “weaponized” cosmetics, fashion, etc). This connects to Marvel in the sense that The Walt Disney Company, who owns Marvel Entertainment, flaunts strong female characters, in this case Black Widow, to appear socially conscious and inclusive, in order to credibly draw in wider audiences. By having these characters at all, their intentions can at minimum be viewed as “in the right place,” though the execution is actually misogynistic. Black Widow is the best example of Marvel and Disney’s flagrant depiction of superheroines, but to fully understand her as an example, one must understand her character.

Black Widow a.k.a. Natasha Romanoff (portrayed by Scarlett Johansson) is a member of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, or S.H.I.E.L.D., the extra-governmental, counter-terrorism intelligence agency led by Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson). She is the first and only female superheroine among the original Avengers crew. Black Widow is first introduced, in the 2010 sequel to *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, as Natalie Rushman, Tony Stark’s new assistant. Her character in the comic universe is depicted as a no-nonsense,

strong and intelligent SHIELD agent, though sadly, this characterization does not translate over to the MCU films. Throughout the course of multiple films, Natasha is continuously objectified and abused by writers and directors through the use of “male gaze” as well as reduced to “The Woman™” trope in which she becomes the emotional catalyst various members of the team. Her personality is molded to suit the need of whichever film is in and as the first female member of the team she is almost compulsively relegated to romantic interest of whichever male hero “needs” her most.

The first issue relating to gender in the MCU is the application of the “male gaze” to female bodies. According to Laura Mulvey in her transformative feminist essay, *Visual And Other Pleasures*, the theory of the male gaze establishes that mainstream Hollywood movies appeal to audiences because of their “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” and, because its been left unrectified, film helped “[code] the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.” Mulvey explains that men and women in cinema are presented quite differently, both on-screen and in the industry as women are often considered as “objects” and male characters usually drive the film’s narrative action (Mulvey, 1999). This is no different for the Marvel Cinematic Universe and *Black Widow*. In Natasha’s case, the male gaze is satisfied through her appearance and eroticization of the violence inflicted on her.

To be specific, the male gaze demands that no matter how capable the female character, she must “sexy” or at least conventionally attractive. From her first appearance to her last, *Black Widow* has always been depicted as the “sexy spy” stereotype. She wears tight-fitted leather jumpsuits that show off a multitude of curves and cleavage in every movie. As Jefferey Brown writes, this is why Marvel and Disney “[struggle] to position themselves as a female-friendly line