Selling Marvel's Cinematic Superheroes through Militarization

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Abstract

The Marvel comics film adaptations have been some of the most successful Hollywood products of the post 9/11 period, bringing formerly obscure cultural texts into the mainstream. Through an analysis of the adaptation process of Marvel Entertainment's superhero franchise from comics to film, I argue that militarization has been used by Hollywood as a discursive formation with which to transform niche properties into mass market products. I consider the locations of narrative ambiguities in two key comics texts, *The Ultimates* (2002-2007) and *The New Avengers* (2005-2012), as well as in the film *The Avengers* (2011), and demonstrate the significant reorientation towards the military of the film franchise. While Marvel had attempted to produce film adaptations for decades, only under the new "militainment" discursive formation was it finally successful. I argue that superheroes are malleable icons, known largely by the public by their image and perhaps general character traits rather than their narratives. Militainment is introduced through a discourse of realism provided by Marvel Studios as an indicator that the property is not just for children.

Keywords: militarization, popular film, comic books, adaptation

1. Introduction

Nick Fury, head of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D) tells his team of assembled superheroes: "there was an idea… called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we [the military organization of S.H.I.E.L.D] never could."

This speech from *The Avengers* (Feige & Whedon, 2012) brings together the various heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to be the eponymous team. *The Avengers* was the most successful of the many superhero films since 2000, grossing $1.52 billion, the third highest total of all time. This level of financial success is a significant leap from the characters' origins in comic books,

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a medium where even the most popular series' sales are only around 100,000 copies (Johnson, 2007) and a medium with a reputation of low cultural value, for children or adults who refuse to "grow up" (Faludi, 2007; Wright, 2001). How did superheroes outside of the traditional icons of the medium, like Superman and Batman, go from niche to mainstream popular culture?[1] And what does this indicate about the state of (North) American popular culture? I argue the film's divergence from its comic source to explicitly present the American superhero team as a part of a military apparatus is key to understanding the film's (and genre's) success.

Studios look at past profitable films to try to pinpoint what was responsible for their success, though these guesses that may be inaccurate. As Grant & Wood (2004) argue, releasing films is a gamble in turns of profit, so studios need to release numerous films, with the successful ones making up for the failures. However, the more invested into a film, the more control the studio has over it. These formulas are seen as ensuring profitability. It is possible a new formula would be even more profitable, but the risk is far greater. The formulas Hollywood creates to replicate profitability function as discursive formations, "types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions, and functioning, transformations)" (Foucault, 1969/2010, p. 38).

One of Hollywood's discursive formations is "militainment", defined by Stahl (2009) as "state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption" (p. 6). Militainment extends far beyond the realm of film, enveloping sports, toys, video games, and reality TV shows. Stahl identifies the shift from the traditional approach American media took in prior wars to the militainment as moving "from an event that must be sold (legitimated by propaganda) to an event that could be sold (integrated into the economy of commercial entertainment, leisure time, and pleasure)" (p.14). Militainment then is not propaganda, which works to deactivate the questioning citizen, but works instead to integrate the citizen into a military-entertainment complex (Stahl, 2009).

This shift follows Bacevich's (2013) theory of the "new aesthetic" (p. 23) of war, where the mass armies of prior wars were replaced by soldiers to be seen as talented specialists who represent idealized American morals using high end technology, creating a gap between the soldier and citizen that had not existed in prior conceptions of the military. This conception is so engrained that even progressives within the United States often see the military establishment "not as an obstacle to social change but as a venue in which to promote it, pointing the way for the rest of society on matters such as race, gender, and sexual orientation" (Bacevich, 2013, p. 25).

My discussion focuses heavily upon the American context. These films do tend to gross less internationally, about 47% compared to approximately 61% for fantasy films like *Lord of the Rings* (Burke, 2015, p. 25). Despite the fact that box office is not an ideal measure of international success to measure popularity as it fails to take into account various ways films can be viewed, it is the most meaningful measure to Hollywood studios. Burke (2015) also noted that the specific Americanness of the superhero film is at odds with the larger trend to de-emphasize national content.

To analyze how Marvel Entertainment has participated in the militainment discursive formation to mainstream its comic book properties, I used two key comics texts, *The Ultimates* (2002-2007) and

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[1] By "popular culture", I will be referring to mass market entertainment.

The New Avengers (2005-2012), as well as in the film *The Avengers* (2012) as the site for textual analysis to demonstrate the significant reorientation towards the military of the film franchise.

2. Marvel Comics

Costello (2009) neatly sums up the overall political picture of Marvel comics as a tendency to pursue "liberalism with a fascist aesthetic" (p. 215). The political idea they strive for is a society where everyone is free from coercion by oppressive entities. The correct use of power is for the individual to use this power to protect the right to freedom for others. The wrong use of power is to use it for your own gain and decrease the freedom of others. While Marvel Comics has characters who are poor (Spider-Man) or face discrimination (the X-Men), the solutions to structural problems are centred on the individual (very rarely is the power ingrained in structures also examined) and government only plays a peripheral role.

In the late 1990's, Marvel's new President Bill Jemas and Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada believed that the weight of continuity was a reason for lagging sales, and decided Marvel needed to return to the company's roots of youthful characters to attract primarily a market of teenage boys. These comics ran parallel to the continuation of Marvel's existing comics, in a move designed to avoid alienating existing readers and so that if it failed, they had existing content to fall back on. Additionally, this was a backdoor exploration of movie concepts, with Jemas emphasizing that he wanted writers to script comics "more the way movies are written" (Riesman, 2015) as film licensing was appearing to be lucrative source of revenue.

Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige lists the 2002 "Ultimate universe" comic *The Ultimates* as the inspiration for the eventual Avengers film, saying it "was an amazing reinvention of *The Avengers*. [Writer] Mark Millar and [editor] Joe Quesada sat down more than ten years ago and said, 'If we had to reinvent *The Avengers* universe today what would we do? How would we change it?' so they were asking and answering the same questions we always do when we have to start to make a movie" (Douglas, 2012). *The Ultimates* brings about the most significant change to Marvel's franchise, as the military is now the organizing force of superheroes, rather than individuals banding together out of a sense of practical need, and later out of a sense of community, as only other superheroes can understand their personal issues. *The Ultimates* begins with Nick Fury meeting with then-President George W. Bush to discuss how the "real problem" America is facing is super terrorism and should invest billions on developing a new super solider serum (like the original, now lost, formula which gave Captain America his power). Bush and Fury agree that a conventional army is impractical for facing terrorism and instead create a "small, superhuman army for 21st century problems" (Millar & Hitch, 2002, *Ultimates* #2). Terrorism being discursively constructed by the American military as inevitable.

Comic artist and writer Jim Lee suggests "that in some ways, the government is our new version of radiation. Radiation used to be the reasons why people got superpowers. Now the government is" (DeFalco, 2005, p. 41). This observation suggests the government is a similar tension to radiation, capable of both innovation and destruction. The government relationship to the superhero takes on shades of Foucault's (1976/1990) definition of the first form of bio-power; the "body as a machine:

its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" (p. 139). In *The Ultimates*, it is no longer the self-driven search for improvement, but the military as the efficient system which provides heroes with the optimization of their capabilities. This also introduces the idea of compensation into the superhero universe. *Avengers* comics typically had vague references that billionaire Iron Man paid for the expenses of the other members (for example, Busiek & Paquette, 2002, *Avengers* vol 3, #56), but the idea was that heroes were motivated by duty rather than profit. Here, individuals with special abilities agree to fight as government soldiers in exchange for the ability to maintain a celebrity lifestyle (Millar & Hitch, 2002, *Ultimates #4*). In *The Ultimates*, the characters are more concerned about fame than heroics, emphasizing their severe character flaws amidst militarized hyperviolence.

However, Millar's post-*Ultimates* interviews suggests the series was supposedly satirical. As he explained in 2008. "It's amazing how many people seem to think this [*War Heroes*] is a neo-con comic. Same thing happened on [Marvel's] *Ultimates*, when it was clearly anti-war through and through. I feel like [director Paul] Verhoeven must have felt after *Starship Troopers*, in the sense that many people are missing the political satire" (Gopalan, 2008). Millar further elaborated in 2013 "People would say, 'I joined the army after reading *The Ultimates* because I wanted to make a difference in the Middle East,' and I was like, 'Well, I kind of meant the opposite of that'" (Reisman, 2013). However, Marvel Studios President Feige was among those who missed the satire, instead disturbingly seeing *The Ultimates* as a reflection of the contemporary world, revealing a problem with militainment, that it is so unsubtle that satire is unrecognizable from serious militainment.

While producing strong sales, *The Ultimates* title had a long production time and featured many delays. Scheduled to be released monthly, there was a four month delay between issues #8 and #9, at which point it moved to a bi-monthly schedule for the remaining four issues. The second mini-series faced similar delays, most notably six months between issues #12 and #13. For a more reliable title to serve as building *The Avengers* brand in advance of the movies, writer Brian Michael Bendis was moved from the "Ultimate Universe" to the old Marvel universe to relaunch the Avengers to become one of Marvel's main titles.

To relaunch the series, Bendis and Marvel made three main changes. The first was to have the Avengers lose their decades old United Nations mandate to operate and become unaffiliated agents (Bendis & Finch, 2005, *Avengers #503*). The second change of the status quo was to remove Nick Fury from S.H.I.E.L.D. after the *Secret War* (Bendis & Dell'otto, 2004-2005) miniseries, where he led a disastrous assassination attempt on Latveria's president, whom he believed was funneling super technology to supervillains. This concern reconfigures supervillains as super terrorists, as Lewis (2012) argues "terrorism is the word that makes any situation instantly dire" (pg. 232). The portrayal of Latveria in *Secret War* (Bendis & Dell'otto, 2004, #2, #3) was very different from Marvel's usual depiction of an Eastern European country populated largely by 19th century peasants, instead now designed to look the way American media often imagines a Middle Eastern country, with Black Widow wearing a niqab as part of her disguise (*Secret War* #2). S.H.I.E.L.D.'s purpose is as an organization designed to handle super-powered individuals when they overstep national interests, which sets up a tense relationship between it and the Avengers (Bendis & Finch, 2005, *Avengers* #502).

The third change was to have Iron Man become the leader of S.H.I.E.L.D. The series has a façade of political relevance over its core purpose to have heroes fight each other. A superhero team with a reality show confronts a supervillain who, in his attempt to escape, blows up an elementary school (Millar & McNiven, 2006, *Civil War* #1). This event becomes a turning point in the Marvel universe, their 9/11 which forces substantial policy change. The public demands American superheroes become accountable to the government and make public their secret identities. The President, drawn to look vaguely like Bush, S.H.I.E.L.D., and Iron Man advocate accountability while, notably, Captain America opposes the plan, arguing that making their identities public renders their families vulnerable to attack and that the government has not always operated in accordance with the heroes' ethics (*Civil War* #1). The rich, white scientists of the Marvel universe, Iron Man, Ant-Man, and Mr. Fantastic, are the biggest supporters of the registration act (*Civil War* #2-3), which as Edlitz (2014) remarks, corresponds to the interests historically best served by the government while the working class heroes like Luke Cage, Hawkeye, and The Falcon oppose it (Civil War #2-3; Bendis & Yu, 2006, *New Avengers* #22). These heroes are hunted down because, as S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Maria Hill declares, "I thought supervillains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law" (*Civil War #1*).

The New Avengers seeks to show how this traditional superhero morality is necessarily complicated in the face of the suspension of civil rights in the name of protection, mirroring the Patriot Act, which enabled the United States government to suspend due process and allow for various forms of surveillance without warrant. To enforce this policy, S.H.I.E.L.D. threatens torture and maintains a secret prison where individuals are detained indefinitely without trial (*Civil War* #4). S.H.I.E.L.D. seems to replicate American policy, perhaps finally dropping the international façade. This is similar to the American break with the United Nations over the invasion of Iraq, which indicated the lack of power the UN could actually have over a security council member state. The in-universe focus is on the US as in *Astonishing X-Men* #3 (2004), written by future Avengers director Joss Whedon, it is clear that S.H.I.E.L.D. is America, explaining why the organization didn't try to stop the destruction of the fictional country of Genosha because it was not on American soil.

The concluding battle of *Civil War* sees Captain America arrested and assassinated on the steps of the courthouse during his trial. Edlitz (2014) suggests that the result of this is shattering the Avengers as being at the centre of the moral universe because while both sides have a moral claim, even if some of their actions are clearly non-heroic. Kaveney (2008) reads Civil War as demonstrating "that quite ordinary and admirable people like Carol Danvers [then Ms. Marvel, now Captain Marvel] and Peter Parker [Spider-man] can become for a while the accomplices of atrocity without turning into red-eyed monsters" (p. 200). By not clearly taking a stance, this reproduces the divisive American political landscape, giving each side a hero to endorse. Fascinatingly, it was also in 2007 that the US Army, through their public relations firm McCann Erickson, began buying advertising space in Marvel's comic books, which suggests a belief the texts belong in a group of other entertainment such as video games and professional sports as spaces where audiences may be receptive to enlisting.

After these changes, the series features tensions between S.H.I.E.L.D. and independent heroes over the morality of world defence and leads to two separate Avengers teams. The New Avengers are the traditional Marvel model of independent loners who overcome their personal problems to stand up for a greater good while S.H.I.E.L.D. takes its inspiration from the Bush era foreign policy and the

Ultimates, with its own team of heroes, the Mighty Avengers (Bendis & Cho, 2007), who use force to solve problems. This team is the first time the Avengers of the main Marvel universe is presented explicitly as a military force. However, as the New Avengers team are largely the pre-registration team, they can be read as implicitly the true Avengers as it continues the narrative Bendis began with his relaunch while *Mighty Avengers* starts new stories. This is contested by Lecker (2013), who reads the New Avengers as being portrayed as less effective due to their continual arguments about principles while the Mighty Avengers are favored by the narrative because they continue an unambiguous stance of continuing to defend the nation.

Overall, the politics of Bendis' *Avengers* lacked coherency, providing the ability to be simultaneously read as either pro-military or anti-military. At times it questioned the post 9/11 security state in the fallibility of S.H.I.E.L.D., while at other times endorsing torture (Bendis et. al., 2008, *Mighty Avengers* #18) and playing upon fears of religious extremist terrorism. *New Avengers* is not ambiguous in tone like *The Ultimates*, but offers a plot that veers between celebration and critique of contemporary American policy, seeking to address complex issues while not alienating readers holding a particular political position.

3. *The Avengers* Film

The Avengers film and the larger MCU follows *The Ultimates* in showing the military, through S.H.I.E.L.D as a necessarily organizing force. S.H.I.E.L.D. in the films receives a redefinition from "Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate", to the more explicitly militaristic "Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division". Its espionage roots have been completely removed, replaced with the aggressive use of enforcement. It is also clearly not international, now focusing on "homeland" intervention Initially when the heroes are brought together, they engage in a masculinity contest of verbal and physical bouts that focus on surface level character traits and abilities rather than their ethical approaches. Without the organizing structure of the military, they would pettily bicker while the world burned. Instead, the military order brings the superheroes together to defend New York from alien destruction, rewriting the 9/11 attacks into a happy ending.

The Avengers recognizes that the long running wars have made American patriotism divisive. The film demonstrates not only a moral nostalgia for World War II, but also for the immediate aftermath of the towers' fall, as evidenced by Feige's dedication of the film to New York firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and other heroes of 9/11. The film's final conflict itself harkens back to 9/11 with its New York setting. McSweeney (2014) suggests *The Avengers* "symbolically recreates and rewrites 9/11 and the war on terror in an attempt to perform some sort of closure by reconciling America with the divisive events of its recent past" (p.129). Here, the trauma of 9/11 is largely averted. Although there is significant property damage, there is not the significant number of lives lost and the use of American force is globally uniting. America suffers only potential tragedy and their handling of it increases their international reputation rather than suffering real tragedy and then pursuing a course of action which alienated it from the international community. This result is complicated by being achieved through manipulation and pursuit of a massively destructive

alternative, but this is kept secret, allowing for a globally unproblematized appreciation of American heroes in the diegesis.

The biggest change is the values of superheroes in considering the lives of their enemies. Because of its traditional as a children's medium, superheroes do not kill. While non-lethal violence may be rooted in children's media, it should not follow that it is childish to grieve life and adult to be uncaring. In the films, Iron Man guns down terrorists which rockets fired into a crowd but only hit the "terrorists". S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers are, along with most of Hollywood's militainment products, present a liberal fantasy of the military. They are effective and disciplined, but not to the point of being dehumanized. They can be lethal, but only to those who "deserve it". The technology used is advanced, functional, and accurate. In very exceptional circumstances, torture may be necessary, although it is effective and revealing of information, unlike in reality. These traits allow for the perception of a "clean war", framing it in a way that makes it easier to obtain public support. The Marvel films have reversed Costello's (2009) summation of superhero comics, becoming fascism with a liberal aesthetic.

4. Military and Realism

This pro-military discursive formation has become a dominant discursive formation in action-based Hollywood film after 9/11. This formation is not universally applied, but has, rather, became the default for movies dealing with violence in contemporary settings in ways meant to be entertaining, such as action and contemporary set-science fiction film, rather than horrific, as in certain dramas. The framework functions as a safety net, as something that will reliably contribute to a profitable film. Militarized films like *The Avengers* both play into and sustain the system of military fervor within the United States, but the roots of militarization run deep and its historical formation is a complex entity. However, even this formation is not a guarantee, as DC's *Green Lantern* (DeLine, Berlanti, & Campbell, 2011), about a military jet pilot who becomes a superhero, barely turned a profit.

The militainment genre is not limited to superheroes. It was solidified by *Transformers* (Murphy, DeSanto, di Bonaventura, Bryce, & Bay, 2007), a blockbuster adaptation of an even more niche property than comics, a children's toy series and cartoon from the 1980s. The film was the highest grossing non-sequel of the year. Rather than focus on the cartoon's conflict between two warring groups of robots, the film's conception was to feature the American military team up with the heroic robots. The military provided extensive support to the film, with every one of the numerous military roles played by military personnel, providing the most recent weaponry, offering military bases for filming, and being the first film post-9/11 to shoot on the Pentagon grounds (Cochran, 2007). Bryon McGarry, the deputy director of the Air Force's public affairs office admitted that "Recruiting and deterrence are secondary goals, but they're certainly there" (Debruge, 2009). The enthusiastic response to the film seems to have created a niche where pop culture combined with military technology is seen as a path to popularity by Hollywood, an industry that replicates successes until they are exhausted. Again, this is not indicating it was necessarily the military that drew in audiences, but Hollywood studios interpreted it this way, and there has been no decline in box office sales to suggest they were wrong.

The success of this militainment discursive formation allowed for the rise of the superhero film. To test this, I return to Burke's (2015) analysis of the various reasons put forward for the superhero boom: 1) the post 9/11 trauma; 2) the advancement of digital film techniques; 3) Hollywood's attraction to pre-packaged franchise; and 4) and Hollywood creative personnel more receptive to comic books as a form, and examine each of them and explain why the militarization narrative is a key reason for the emergence of the genre in films. The first relates to the larger issues of American politics, that post-9/11 culture, as Klein (2007), Bacevich (2013), and Prince (2009) argue, is used to intensify and justify the privatization of military interests. It is in the military's interests to encourage films which depict a dangerous world where they are the only hope for protection.

Superheroes as a vehicle for special effects is a favoured argument put forth by critics like Bordwell (2008) who wish to avoid discussions about film's politics. However, nothing inherent in special effects demands superhero stories as opposed to another type of visual effects heavy genre, like space opera. The expectation of the military's presence in special effect films is generated by militainment's technofetishism. The desire for a pre-packaged franchise seems more compelling for characters with a long history of popularity like Batman, Superman, or Spider-Man, all of whom had film franchises pre-9/11. What is unusual is that Marvel has demonstrated the ability to make popular films out of lesser characters with much smaller pre-existing fan bases like Iron Man or Thor. The production personnel being more open to comic books argument is compelling, but needs to be connected to something else. As comics moved from their position as disposable children's entertainment to legitimate, if niche, subculture in the 1980s, it is understandable that Hollywood would look to this source for easy film ideas. However, this does not explain why studio producers would think this material would connect with an audience outside the niche. Additionally, none of these factors call for superhero stories of the type Marvel produces, where the military becomes a core element.

While the above explanations cover why superhero films tend to revolve around safe storytelling, they do not answer why this safety is framed by militarization. Militarization enters the films because it sits at the core of post 9/11 action Hollywood's discursive formation. It mediates the transition from niche to mainstream. It mitigates risk. The military, like Hollywood, thrives on the same spectacle as special effects, but with real technology that must be demonstrated to intimidate. The built-in character recognition is appealing to Hollywood, but at the same time, there is an obvious desire to brand the characters for adults in addition to children. It is these final reasons that emphasize the adoption of the militainment discursive formation by the superhero genre.

The military discursive formation is not usually applied to fantasy films that take place outside of a recognizable reality, such as a fantasy world or an imagined future. For example, *Avatar* (Cameron & Landau, 2009) takes a critical stance against privatized military, although this criticism is tempered by the protagonist being a former Marine. However, given its box office dominance, *Avatar* demonstrates that a pro-military stance may not be necessary for financial success. It is in the mixture of the recognizable with the fantastic that studios fear they will lose the audience. Studios believe imaginative concepts will struggle to attract viewers of all ages rather than mainly children. Marvel sought a way to demonstrate their films were for a general audience. Marvel has been attempting to adapt its properties to films since 1970, but had difficulty securing the high production budgets due to the imagined limited audience (Howe, 2012). Superheroes are malleable properties,

meaning they can simultaneously operate within multiple discursive formations. The continual re-writing of comics goes further once they cross mediums. The general awareness of the character in popular culture far exceeds the relatively small readership of comics. Most characters have a few essential, recognizable traits such as a costume and super powers, and perhaps a personality type. Merchandise has outsold comics since the late 1960s, a gap that has grown progressively wider (Burke, 2015, p. 58). The character's image is more valuable than their narrative. While limited, there is still a wide range of possibilities for how to reimagine characters to fit a specific formation. The military formation was a way to demonstrate the seriousness of the characters to market them beyond children[2], to gain an audience on a scale where high budgets could still be profitable.

The result is that studios have turned to a discourse of "realism", intensified by the success of Christopher Nolan's *Batman* films (Roven, Thomas, Franco, & Nolan, 2005; Thomas, Roven, & Nolan, 2008; Thomas, Roven, & Nolan, 2012). This communicates to potential audiences that the genre is not just for children or stereotypical comic book "nerds", but that it can be enjoyed like other mainstream action films. Examples of this discourse include director Anthony Russo discussing fitting Spider-Man into the MCU: "It's a very specific tonal world. It's a little more grounded and a little more hard-core contemporary [than the previous Spider-Man franchises]" (Gallagher, 2016). Marvel "Chief Creative Officer" Joe Quesada described *Thor* and *Captain America* as "grounded very much in the real world" (Anderton, 2011). The idea is the superhero and their villains are unrealistic, but that both exist in a world that is approximately the same as reality. "Realism" is an excuse as to why changes need to be made from one medium to another. The notion of "realism" is absurd as there is nothing realistic or grounded about superheroes battling back alien invasions led by a figure from Norse mythology. "Grounded" instead is a mask for a particular notion of "realism", which in this case is the alignment with militarization.

Brooker (2012) argues that in the context of the *Batman* films, realism took on the meaning of an angry, violent masculinity and an emphasis on technology. Batman's equipment is presented as real military technology, with his designer telling him, for example, the suit is "Nomex survival suit for advanced infantry. Kevlar bi-weave" (Roven, Thomas, Franco, & Nolan, 2005). This emphasis reflects both Barry's (2011) concept of militarized masculinity and the technological fetishism emphasized by Stahl (2009). It is largely the same in the Marvel universe, with a military bureaucracy largely replacing the brooding masculinity (implied as part of militarization) of Nolan's *Batman*, although technology is a constant across both. Grounded is not a connection to reality, but a connection to the militarized discursive formation. The military's presence has become so normalized that is has become the grounding factor. Because of this, *The Ultimates* struggled as satire because its satire of the military was too similar to serious portrayal. Under militainment, militarization is naturalized and invisible.

Following militizarization, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is positivist and technologically determinist. While the roots of the Marvel comic universe lay in the Cold War interest in science, the comics science functioned largely as a *deus ex machina* for the plot**.** This science coexists in a world

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[2] Since the success of Marvel's "Phase One", the studio has produced the series *Daredevil* (Johnson, 2015-2016) and *Jessica Jones* (Iacofano, 2015) on Netflix, both of which were rated TV-MA, with Marvel marketing to only an adult audience.

of inexplicable magic phenomenon and powerful cosmic beings, and does not require explanation. The MCU instead attempts to explain magic, something they are much more hesitant to use than in the comics, as science humans do not yet understand. Crowes (2011) compellingly argues the issue with "realist" superhero films is that it suggests that militarized technology is the solution to our problems. If only we continue to fund the military's research and development, eventually they will produce a weapon or tool, perhaps something like the Iron Man armour for soldiers, that will finally end conflict. The notion of being "grounded in reality" means that the world of superheroes is perhaps not a complete fantasy, but with the right breakthroughs in (military) technology, it is a glimpse of our future.

5. Conclusion

The militarization of Marvel demonstrates that militarized films reflect a society where linkage to the military-industrial complex is seen as a viable strategy to mainstream a niche property like *Iron Man*, a character that while popular enough to maintain an ongoing comic book title, had little transmedia presence prior to the film release. The risk of costly effects spectacle is mitigated by studios' playing upon the near unquestioned presence of the military as signifier of realism and quality to the American audience.

But this is not simply either an economic decision or mere reflection of audience tastes, but part of an active entrenchment of a militarized society. My further ongoing research examines the social impacts of militainment and how the superhero, while never an idea pro-social genre, had a different ethical dimension in acting out of analysis of society's problems rather than to act from duty as a soldier. While this may not be ideal, it is preferable to militarization, to actively think about injustice rather than passively go along with the dominant narrative of the American military. As Barry (2013) suggests "the first step in unmaking war is resisting military recruitment" (p. 13) and I believe that by calling attention to a formation so normalized as to be unremarkable, this research helps contribute to that end.

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