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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In her 1985 comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Alison Bechdel created what later came to be known as the Bechdel test. This test assesses if female characters of relevance are present in a film. In order to pass, there must be at least two women in the film, who both have names, and talk to each other about something other than a man (Bechdel 22). Although passing this test is still no indication of whether or not the female characters in a film are well written, there are still many Hollywood films that do not pass this test. The website bechdeltest.com, with a database of over 7000 films, states that only 57.9% of all films on their website pass all three tests (two named women, talking to each other, about a different topic than men), and as much as 10.3% do not even pass any of the tests (Bechdel Test Movie List, review site). These Bechdel test results highlight the fact that there is a problem with female representation in the media. Apart from a deficiency of female characters in films and TV-shows, women are constantly stereotyped, and there is a distinct lack of diverse portrayals of women as well as other groups (such as people of color, disabled people, or gender-diverse people).

One of the many film franchises that fail the Bechdel test[1] is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which consists of a series of films all produced in the last decade, starting with *Iron Man (2008)*, and is a pop-culture phenomenon due to its immense success. Of its 19 films, seven do not pass the test, and the others also only have a few instances where women actually talk to each other (Bechdel Test Movie List, review site). The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has undergone a lot of critique, be it by casting a white actor instead of a person of color in the role of the sorcerer Doctor Strange or the low number of black superheroes compared to the high amount of white heroes. Especially the lack of female characters was criticized, since before the film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), the character Black Widow was the only female superhero (in comparison with at least 5 male superheroes), with only a handful of other female characters in active roles. Despite this criticism and the lack of female

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[1] Popular film franchises that include films not passing the Bechdel test are *The Fast and the Furious* (2001-2017), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *The Hobbit* (2012-2014), and *Star Wars* (1977-2017). Of course, with the exception of *The Lord of the Rings*, not every film of these franchises fails the test, but this still shows that women are underrepresented in many popular franchises (Bechdel Test Movie List, review site).

characters, the women that do have screen time in the films have been praised, due to them being tough and successful in a male-dominated domain.

For this thesis, not only the overall lack of female characters in the Marvel series is important, but also the way in which these characters are represented. Black Widow, the most prominent superheroine in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, was called a feminist icon and the character was received positively. [2] However, with the publication of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), the characterization of Black Widow changed. In the second installment of *The Avengers*, she tells her teammate and love interest Bruce Banner that she is a monster, not because of her profession as an assassin or her ruthless nature, but rather of her being sterilized as part of her training. This raises the question as to why a female character's value in a 2015 blockbuster is directly connected to her ability to have children and, furthermore, whether her lack of "womanhood" is the reason for her status as an action heroine. The main incentive for writing this thesis is the fact that in action films like the Marvel series, stereotypical and problematic representations of women are still quite common. Since films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe are consumed by an incredibly high number of people, it has the ability to greatly influence people's opinions about gender, sexuality, race, or power relations. This is why this thesis tries to shed a light on the films' portrayal of women, especially linked to violence.

While there is a multitude of works dedicated to analyzing female characters in action films of the 1980s and 90s, and the so-called 'action babes' of the late 1990s and early 2000s, not much has been written about the rather new type of female action hero, the superheroine[3]. With the emergence of film franchises such as the *X-Men* films, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and the DC Extended Universe, the contrast between the lack of female characters on the one hand and female-led films on the other is evident. However, with the exception of Jeffrey Brown's book *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, and *The 21st Century Superhero*, edited by Richard Grey II, as well as a few articles on the topic, the conversation about the depiction of female characters

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[2] See for example: Coleman Benjamin, Jillian. "Feminism in American Cinema: The Many Incarnations of Black Widow". *Marvel's Black Widow from Spy to Superhero. Essays on an Avenger with a Very Specific Skill Set*. Ed. Sherry Gin. Jefferson: McFarland, 2017. 72-87.

in the Marvel and other new superhero films is mostly happening online, in the form of internet forums, YouTube videos, blogs, and websites such as Tumblr. One book that serves as the basis for my thesis, however, is Lisa Purse's work *Contemporary Action Cinema,* since she explores the representation of women in action films in much detail. Since this thesis not only aims to examine how women are presented in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but also tries to explain what led to this representation, I also incorporate postfeminism into this analysis. McRobbie describes postfeminist culture as "an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined" (*Postfeminism* 27). Tasker and Negra note that according to postfeminist ideology, not only is female power taken for granted but feminism is seen as old-fashioned and unnecessary since equality between men and women has already been achieved. As a consequence, traditional femininity is promoted, disparities are ignored, and individualism is celebrated (Tasker and Negra 2). Consequently, I integrate various articles about postfeminism into this thesis, such as "Killing Bill" by Lisa Coulthard and "Postfeminism and Popular Culture" by Angela McRobbie, as well as "Postfeminist Media Culture" by Rosalind Gill.

The goal of this thesis is to explore how and for which reasons violence is used by female characters in the Marvel film series and, moreover, how this use of violence can be read while bearing contemporary postfeminist rhetoric in mind. I claim that the Marvel Cinematic Universe maintains a patriarchal ideology by conveying postfeminist ideas which subsequently leads to the active disempowerment of female superheroes in the movie series. I base my analysis on the postfeminist idea of containment strategies. In relation to female action characters, Purse claims that these containment strategies stem from a "desire to set the potentially culturally disturbing possibility of female agency and physical power at a distance from our everyday contemporary reality" (81). Furthermore, I will link the containment strategies found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to postfeminist theory in order to support my claim that postfeminist rhetoric can be found in this film series. Therefore, the structure of this thesis will be the following: firstly, the Marvel Cinematic Universe's role in pop culture and the reason for its success will be explored. After that, I will define the concepts of the action film as well as the superhero, since these two terms are at the center of my thesis, and I will explore the history of the female character before the emergence of the postfeminist superheroine. What follows is theoretical framework which will be

comprised of theories about postfeminism, based on the works of Gill, McRobbie, Tasker and Negra, and Gentz, as well as containment strategies, which stem from Foucault's theory on disciplinary power and will also be based on the works of postfeminist scholars such as McRobbie and Purse. I will then analyze depictions of women and female violence in the different Marvel films, focusing on women in the film series who are superheroines in the broadest sense. To conclude, I will try to find reasons for the above analyzed portrayal of female characters and, with the help of several studies, briefly look into the impact this portrayal can have on young women.

As mentioned above, at the time of this thesis' completion, the Marvel Cinematic Universe consists of 19 films. Since not every film of the Marvel series features female superheroes, this analysis will only take into account *Iron Man 2 (2010)*, *Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014), Captain America: Civil War (2016), Thor: Ragnarok (2017)*, *The Avengers (2012); Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1 (2014)* and *Vol. 2 (2017)*. I will not consider the newly released films *Black Panther (2018)* and *Avengers: Infinity War (2018)* (although these films also feature multiple female superheroes), as well as the multitude of MCU-based TV series, such as *Jessica Jones* or *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, since the inclusion of further material would have gone beyond the scope of this analysis.

2. The MCU and the superhero film as a pop-culture phenomenon

In the media landscape, the last two decades have brought many changes, ranging from post-9/11 narratives, the birth of the 3D-film, as well as the launch of Netflix and other streaming-based services, and the resulting changes in viewing patterns. One of the many changes the beginning of the 2000s brought for mainstream cinema was the birth of the superhero film as we now know it, an action-laden blockbuster attracting a large audience (Gray 1). For many years now, Hollywood has been dominated by different superhero franchises.[4] If the yearly box-office successes are

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[4] This also goes for the small screen, since beginning with *Smallville* (2001-2011), many superhero TV-shows have been published in the last few years, for example *Misfits* (2009-2013), *Arrow*

taken into account, the top 10 earners of 2017 included four superhero films, the same goes for 2016 (Box Office Mojo 2016, 2017). This chapter offers a definition of the superhero and action film as a genre in general, as well as the Marvel Cinematic Universe in particular and offers an explanation for their success.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a superhero film franchise with almost twenty installments produced by Marvel Studios and distributed by Disney. [5] At the moment, the MCU is the highest-grossing franchise of all time, grossing over $15 billion world-wide (Statista, online database). The films are adaptions of numerous Marvel comic books and all of them play in the same universe. Many of the (male) superheroes featured in the MCU are the titular heroes of up to three films, including Iron Man, the Hulk, Captain America, Thor, Ant Man, Doctor Strange, and Black Panther, with many more heroes to be introduced in future movies. Every few years, the superheroes are brought together in a movie to form a team and fight against evil. In these ensemble films, a few other superheroes show up, some of whom are also present in multiple films.[6]

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is divided into several parts, called phases. Phase 1, which went from 2008 to 2012 and introduced the audience to three of the main superheroes, Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor, also established the world in which the films were set (a world similar to ours but aware of the presence of superheroes). An organization called S.H.I.E.L.D., a U.S. extra-governmental intelligence agency, founded to protect the world from all possible (mostly supernatural/extra-terrestrial) threats, is the reason why the individual superheroes work together, since the organization recruits all of them to form a team, called the Avengers, in order to fight aliens. The second phase of the MCU introduces more heroes and pushes the story forward. Due to mishaps with artificial intelligence

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(2012-present), *The Flash* (2014-present), *Daredevil* (2015-present), *Legion* (2017-present), or *Black Lightning* (2018-present).

[5] There are also multiple TV-series (such as *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones,* or *Iron Fist*) which are part of the universe. Often the series take up current events of the films, and some of the characters have already been part of the films in addition to the series.

[6] So far, recurring secondary characters are Black Widow, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch, War Machine, the Falcon, and the Vision, to name just a few. These characters, although they have not yet received their own feature films, regularly appear in ensemble films such as *The Avengers*, but also act as supporting characters in films that focus on the main heroes (such as Iron Man, Thor, or Captain America).

resulting in a murderous robot destroying parts of Sokovia, a fictional state in Eastern Europe, the public is increasingly skeptical of superheroes.[7] The second phase also introduces the Guardians of the Galaxy, a group of former intergalactic outlaws. The third phase is focused on the Infinity Stones, six stones found in far corners of the universe. Thanos, an extra-terrestrial warlord, is in search of the stones in order to gain control over the universe and in turn save it from overpopulation by wiping out half of the universe's inhabitants. A few more superheroes are introduced in this phase, but most importantly, the last two ensemble movies of this phase, titled *Avengers: Infinity War* and the yet unnamed *Avengers 4*, which is not released at the time of writing this thesis, bring together the superheroes based on earth and in space for the battle against Thanos.[8]

2.1. Marvel as a global brand

Over the last two decades, approximately beginning with the turn of the new century, the superhero film has gained much popularity. Before films such as the *X-Men* franchise were launched, most superhero films were cheaply made B-movies, a far cry from the blockbuster films of the last few years, with the exception of Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) and Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). The X-Men franchise started in 2000 and brought superheroes to the big screen with a large budget and well-known actors such as Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, and Hugh Jackman. The films set a much more serious tone than their low-budget predecessors (Robb 334) and laid the groundwork for the next successful franchise, *Spider-Man*, which survived for the time span of three movies between 2002 and 2007, before being rebooted within only five years. The only other notable movie franchise apart from the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the *Batman* franchise, which is only the latest of many reboots of Batman films, and so far the most grounded and serious one.

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[7] The "public" plays a big role in the MCU, especially in the *Avengers* films. The Marvel superheroes do not operate in secret but are known by name (Tony Stark even holds a press conference to tell the world that he is Iron Man). This means that when the Avengers destroy parts of cities due to fighting their villains, there is public uproar (in the films this is mainly shown by TV news clips of protests or news presenters talking about the threat the Avengers pose to civilians). In *Captain America: Civil War*, the United Nations decides to regulate the Avengers' activities and urge the Avengers to sign a set of legal documents, the Sokovia Accords, to ensure that the Avengers no longer operate privately.

[8] Phase Three will not be the last phase of the Marvel films, since Marvel has already announced Phase Four films release dates for the next four years (Eisenberg, online magazine article).

The MCU, which started with *Iron Man* (2008), has started yet another era of superhero films, with their interrelated nature being part of its extreme success (Robb 351). Although Marvel had to use many of their more obscure superheroes due to contract reasons.[9] these films have so far proven to be popular, since all the characters are part of the same world, consisting of films and television series with occasional overlaps (characters such as Agent Coulson and Agent Peggy Carter, who appeared in numerous films, also received their own TV-series). The fact that all the MCU films and TV-shows are set in the same fictional world allowed Marvel to build a film universe that mirrors the comics and feature interrelated storylines. Additionally, apart from pleasing the fans, it was possible to promote the MCU as a whole by creating one universe in which all the different superheroes' stories are linked together. Marvel created a diegetic universe instead of releasing a number of stand-alone films, and offers "fan-services", such as cameos of other characters (mostly in Marvel's famous post-credit scenes) or of former Marvel editor-in-chief Stan Lee, who gets a short cameo in every Marvel film up to this day (Brown, *Superhero* 20). Since all their films are set in the by now well-known universe, Marvel can release films with largely unknown characters, simply by using taglines such as "From the studio that brought you…" (Brown, *Superhero* 20).[10]

The reason behind the MCU's success, though, is not solely found in the creation of a universe in which all plotlines take place, but also in the marketing. The release of *The Avengers* in 2012 was preceded by a 5-year plan of merchandizing to different demographics. There were toys, costumes, or cartoons for children of different age groups, computer games for teenagers, and higher-priced merchandise for adults (Brown, *Superhero* 21). As Paul Gitter, the president of consumer goods for Marvel states, the goal is not just to ensure the movies success:

> The big play here is that Marvel is really looking at our films more as brands and less as films. The goal here is to become more of a household name similar to Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson. We want Marvel to take a much

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[9] Marvel sold the film rights for their more mainstream heroes and heroines such as Spider-Man or the X-Men to other studios and as a result had to use their lesser-known superheroes in the MCU (see also Robb 351).

[10] Marvel's film version of the largely unknown comic book series *Guardians of the Galaxy* grossed third-highest in 2014 (Box office Mojo, online database) although it had no well-known characters or star-powered cast (except for Vin Diesel lending his voice to the tree-like alien Groot).

greater position in the minds of the consumer when they are thinking about our properties (Steinberg, online magazine article).

Thus, what sets the Marvel Cinematic Universe apart from other brands, are the sheer infinite ways the MCU can be expanded. While other brands such as Harry Potter are also well-marketed and spread across different media (books, films, computer games, merchandize, the Harry Potter Studios, etc.), Marvel's advantage is that the Universe can rely on the multitude of characters, the infinite amount of spin-offs ready to spread across every possible media platform, therefore creating an unprecedented transmedia franchise (Brown, *Superhero* 22). Marvel is the first, but will not be the last of these pop culture phenomena, with Time Warner expanding the *Harry Potter* films, or Disney releasing more *Star Wars* films (Brown, *Superhero* 22f). Ever-expanding universes will most likely be a great part of the movie landscape of the future.

2.2.   The action and superhero film

Part of the reason for the MCU's initial success might lie in the genre as a whole. Action movies are exemplary of box-office triumphs in Hollywood (Purse, *Action Cinema* 3). In 2017 alone, fourteen of the top 20 highest grossing movies were part of the action genre (Box Office Mojo, online database). Many of the key releases in blockbuster season are action or action-adventure movies. Most action-adventure movies are very dialogue-light, which allows them to succeed in English and non-English speaking countries and they can easily be transferred to other formats (video games, toys etc.), which allows for profits outside of box office takings. Additionally, action film blockbusters are crucial for the studios to spread their financial risks (Purse, *Action Cinema* 4).

If one looks at the list of US domestic grosses of 2017 alone, the movies of the action genre could not be more different. There are superhero films such as *Wonder Woman* and *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Star Wars: The last Jedi,* a science fiction epos, *Jumanji*, an action-adventure film, *Dunkirk*, a war film, or the *Fate of the Furious*, which centers on cars. The main characteristic of action cinema is its adaptability, since it is mainly a hybrid form of film genre. Purse (*Action Cinema* 2) points out that most action films can be summarized as "generic hyphenates," such as action-thrillers, action-comedies, or action-adventures. The action film has always used tropes from other

genres (western melodrama, horror etc.), which leads to a definition problem for the genre. A few writers suggest that defining action cinema is best done through its characteristics. Lichtenfeld (5) names physical action, such as fistfights, swordfights, or gunfights as one of the foundations of the genre, while Neale (52) considers narrative and visual tropes and a tendency for physical action, a narrative centering on fights and pursuits, special effects, and a focus on the athleticism of the action body to be the defining features of action cinema. Tasker (*Action and Adventure*) focuses on the narrative and adds the quest for freedom and "the hero's ability to use his/her body in overcoming enemies and obstacles" but concludes that the action film is an example for "the ongoing debate regarding the instability of genre and the extent to which individual films can be regarded as participating simultaneously in a number of genres" (2).

What all action films have in common is that they are a form of film that has been taken for granted by most critics and as a result is not approached precisely enough (Lichtenfeld 6). Action films have a reputation for substituting a lacking narrative with action scenes, causing many films of this genre to be criticized for using spectacular technology, such as CGI and visual effects, to excess, which ultimately overshadows everything else. Many filmmakers are concerned about the "narrative being subsumed by spectacle" (Purse, *Action Cinema* 22), which is a characteristic of "new" Hollywood as opposed to the classical "Golden Age" of Hollywood. Despite what these claims about spectacle in Hollywood films might suggest, the spectacular has long been a characteristic of popular cinema. Purse cites the German essayist Clare Goll, who wrote the following in an essay about American cinema published in 1920:

> What is happening or rather racing by on the screen can no longer be called plot. It is a new dynamic, a breathless rhythm, action in an unliterary sense… The American cinema has already accustomed its public too much. Tanks ride into houses, three cars race into one another or into the sea; 2,000 metres up, a man performs acrobatics from one airplane to another and comes down on a parachute over the ocean and New York without knowing whether and where he will land (qtd. In Purse, Action Cinema 22).

Geoff King (202) describes contemporary blockbusters as narrative structures that are not just created to dump a big heap of visual spectacle on its viewers but to engage the audience and subsequently boost the impact of the action scenes. This is why he warns against such statements that claim action films "lack" narrative. Blockbusters

may lack an original narrative, but this is clearly not the same as lacking coherent narrative altogether. Action scenes are not the antipode of narrative, but instead are able to drive forward the plot and work with it (Purse, *Action Cinema* 27).

The reasons why there is a "wow-factor" incorporated into blockbuster films in terms of action sequences or CGI, are mostly economic influences and led by the desire to exceed expectations – not only visually but also in terms of box-office success, which of course then leads to accusations such as "spectacle for spectacle's sake." These spectacles, however, are often linked to the narrative. In the context of popular cinema, "spectacle" means "beyond the realm of everyday experience" but also refers to the mode of presentation, since spectacle in action films is used to have an impact and trigger a response, such as shock or surprise (Purse, *Action Cinema* 28). The action sequence as a whole also has an important function, namely to depict the hero's capacities in a way that is linked to the narrative. Action sequences have a "developmental purpose," which means that the hero's capacities are heightened as she or he moves towards the final showdown. They are not just stand-alone tests of the action hero's abilities, but instead they operate towards the hero's development (Purse, *Action Cinema* 33).

The superhero film is a particular form of action film, situated within the broader genre of fantasy films, although with the new wave of superhero films of the last two decades, one can see that even these films are hybrids of many different genres. For example, *Captain America* (2011) is a period piece, set for the most part in the 1940s, while *Thor* (2011) is a fantasy epic, set in Marvel's version of Asgard, home to Norse Gods. Nevertheless, all of these films focus on spectacle, ranging from set design, visual effects, the numerous action sequences, and the combining of comic book conventions with those of Hollywood's action film (Tasker *Action and Adventure,* 179f.). Since the recent superhero films can be situated in many different subgenres, it is important to establish a definition of the superhero film on its own. As Jeffrey A. Brown (*Superhero*, 5) puts it, the superhero film can be described "[…] as filmed stories about costumed and/or super powered characters, performed by actors, who battle villains and defend the greater community." There are numerous conventions around the superhero film as a whole, as well as further conventions and tropes concerning the narrative (e. g. the "origin story") and the visuals, which are common

but not essential. Brown (*Superhero*, 4) even argues that due to the rise in popularity in the past years, and the way many of the films are interrelated, the superhero film develops towards being a genre of its own. This way, Brown distinguishes himself clearly from Tasker. Brown argues that the superhero films before 2000 can be seen as part of the action genre. Since the 2000s, however, superhero films or the superhero as a whole has become a unique genre "with clear narrative conventions, formulaic situations, and recognizable character types" (Brown *Superhero*, 3). Nevertheless, although Brown's categorization of the superhero as a distinct genre fits well into the current conventions of superhero films, since they resonate well with the current structure, narrative, and tropes found in these movies, for my thesis I find it important to recognize the superhero film as a subgenre of, or at least a genre derived from, the action film. Action film conventions, especially concerning action scenes and female action characters, apply to both superhero films and other action films and constitute the basis of this thesis.

2.3. The definition of the superhero

Since by now the characteristics of both action films as well as superhero films have been established, the only thing left to define is the superhero. Peter Coogan (30) notes that in the 1952 legal dispute about whether the comic book character Wonder Man infringed upon Superman, a definition of superheroes was introduced by Judge Learned Hand. This definition consists of the characteristics of mission, powers and identity which also serve as the basis of Coogan's own definition. Coogan's definition will be used for defining superheroes in this thesis.

Superheroes are usually characterized by having a selfless mission to fight against evil. Acting selflessly and not out of self-interest is essential since it underlines the heroic character of the superhero. Superman's mission, as quoted by Coogan (31) is to be a "champion of the oppressed… sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need." In contemporary superhero films, the characters' missions are not as clear-cut as in the early comics. Since the superheroes' humanity (although not all of them are human) is foregrounded, their missions are pushed into the background. As an example, in the movie *Captain America: Civil War*, the superheroes' mission is still to protect humankind, but due to internal differences within the Avengers team, this

mission is pushed aside, and the superheroes fight each other, which even leads to some of them ending up in a high-security prison.

Another characteristic of superheroes is their power. Coogan claims that these powers are to "emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre" (31). Indeed, superheroes have their distinctive abilities – many of them show some degree of superhuman strength (Superman, Captain America, Thor), but there are also rarer powers such as the ability to climb onto walls in a spider-like manner (Spider-Man), mind manipulation (Scarlet Witch) or magical abilities (Doctor Strange). With time, superheroes became more diverse, and so not all the individuals within the ranks of Marvel's superheroes possess actual powers, most notably Iron Man, who does not possess any powers himself, but has a super-powered suit, or Hawkeye and Black Widow, who do not have superpowers either. As it is the case with Black Widow, however, her physical strength could be described as bordering on superhuman, since in the movies' action scenes, she oftentimes has no problem with knocking out multiple people in a matter of seconds.

When it comes do identity, superheroes are known for their codenames (Iron Man, Captain America, Batman etc.) and costumes (often in bright colors) (Coogan 32). There also has to be a more or less obvious relation between the superhero's name and inner character, biography, or powers. Hawkeye, for example, is hawk-eyed, since he is an extremely skilled archer, and Batman's identity stems from Bruce Wayne's encounter with a bat. The costume plays a role, too when establishing the superhero's identity. This means that the costumes have to match the character's alter ego (or at least their name). This is why Batman's costume somewhat resembles a bat, Iron Man is a man in a metal suit, Spider-Man has a spider net as well as a spider on his costume and Captain America wears the American flag on his torso. The costume's color is also regarded as important. Most of the superheroes' costumes have bright, primary colors, at least in their early versions. This stems from the tradition of printing comics in only four colors. What is interesting is that the clear, bright colors used in a superhero's costume (or general layout) are a tool for the reader/audience to identify the characters (Coogan 34). In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as well as in other contemporary superhero films and series, the color scheme of the characters has

stayed largely the same, but the colors have been dulled. Still, to a large extent it is possible to associate each superhero with their specific colors.

The three markers of the definition (mission, powers, and identity) are of course only a point of reference and cannot be found with every superhero. The characters of Gamora and Black Widow, who will be important for this thesis, do not have any special powers, although, as mentioned above, they do seem to be stronger than the average person, similar as it is with characters such as James Bond. Scarlet Witch is the easiest superheroine to identify: Her name and her powers align, since she possesses magic powers that are shown as red flames. Additionally, since *Captain America: Civil War*, she wears a mostly red costume, which also underlines her name and powers. Gamora does not seem to fulfill the requirements of two defining superhero categories, power or identity, since her name is not linked to her identity and she does not have any superhuman powers apart from maybe possessing advanced physiology due to her alien heritage (which is not clear when only watching the movies). Her costume is not an identity marker, either. She is, however, considered a superhero since she is part of the Guardians of the Galaxy, and therefore one of the Marvel Cinematic Universes' many main characters. Additionally, Coogan (40) claims:

> The similarities between specific instances of a genre are semantic, abstract, and thematic, and come from the constellation of conventions that are typically present in a genre offering. If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero.

All the characters that will be analyzed have a mission or a driving force or motivation. Since these missions also play a part in the characters' use of violence, the characters' missions will be discussed in the analysis part of this paper.

As established before, action and especially superhero movies are often belittled and depicted as irrelevant due to their lack of narrative. They are assumed to be juvenile and simple, with their spectacle and their entertainment value as the only thing speaking for them (Brown *Superhero*, 2). For this thesis, however, this type of film is highly relevant. Action films generally attract a large audience, and, as mentioned above, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the highest grossing franchise world-wide, with their film universe expanding yearly by at least three films. The films

internationally attract a very large audience, so depictions of cultural topics, such as gender or power relations, have a high impact.

It also has to be taken into consideration that the genre is very appealing to audiences at the moment, with a range of intersecting themes relevant to the viewers, such as racial politics, gender, nationalism, or capitalism (Brown *Superhero*, 3). In their study on the effects of female characters in superhero films on women, Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (213) state that media messages generally help develop "gender-linked knowledge and competences," so in the case of gender, the audience's standards about gender-appropriate behavior and appearance, as well as gender norms, are developed. In superhero films, the gender narrative is transformed into a supergendered narrative with hypermuscular males and hypersexualized females, which glorifies traditional gender roles (214). The superheroine offers a much more capable picture of a woman, but is at the same time represented as hypersexualized in order to balance out her masculine traits. This way, they can appeal to audiences since they do not deviate far from traditional gender norms (214). Therefore, superhero texts cannot be seen as simple entertainment. Due to their focus on the body, they emphasize gender identities and attitudes which has relevant implications for the real world as well. The way in which female characters in these movies have to resist but at the same time conform to gender norms, and the superhero film's relationship to gender norms as a whole, makes this film genre relevant for analyzing it through the lens of postfeminist pop-cultural beliefs.

2.4.   The action heroine

Apart from the characterization of female characters in action films, one of the most obvious problems today's superhero and action films face is their distinct lack of female heroes. According to a study conducted by Heldman et al., of 201 action films released between 2010 and 2014, only 30 had a female lead, which means that less than 15% of the action films had a female action hero (4). In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, out of 19 films since 2008, none had a female lead and there are only a handful of female characters with larger roles, all either as part of ensemble films or in order to support the male hero. In 2005, Marvel released its last movie featuring a female main character, *Elektra*. This film is not part of the MCU franchise, but it could

have ideally been the forerunner of various female-led superhero films, although it took nine years to announce a new Marvel film led by a female character (*Captain Marvel*, expected to be released in 2019). In 2017, DC's *Wonder Woman* was launched, but in the twelve years in between, superheroines have only played a marginal role. This chapter examines the development of the action heroine, the depiction of superheroines since 2000, and the numerous problematic aspects that emerge before presenting the theoretical groundwork for my analysis of female superheroes in the Marvel films.

In the broader genre of action films, the female action hero has gained considerable popularity since the 1980s and 1990s with characters such as Ripley from *Alien* series, Sarah Connor from the *Terminator* series and the titular characters in *Thelma and Louise* as the by far most prominent examples, as well as *Lara Croft* or *Charlie's Angels*. Female action heroes are said to reveal questions about the fluidity of gender identities and female representation in pop culture and are described as transgressive and transformative (Hills 38f.). Action heroines are, however, not a phenomenon limited to contemporary cinema (Neroni 15). The earliest filmic manifestation of a woman capable of violence occurs in the first full-length film *The Story of the Kelly Gang* in 1906 (Heldman et al. 2). In the 1910s and 20s, the violent woman can be found in the so-called Serial Queen Melodramas, short, action-packed series centering on a heroine. These early action heroines are not afraid to use guns, and although in the end they often need to be saved by a man, the Serial Queens are able to conquer not only domestic but also rural or urban spaces (Neroni 15). In the 1940s, with the emergence of film noir, another female action character is born with the femme fatale, the deadly woman, defined by her beauty, sexuality, and sensuality. She is confident, intelligent, and aware of her appearance. Films noirs feature female characters who do not conform to conventional gender roles, be it due to their sexuality or their refusal to be submissive (Tasker, *Film Noir* 359). Put into context, this dislocation makes sense, since the 1940s saw a social and economic shift in America that undoubtedly had an effect on women's lives. It can be argued that women being employed during the war and then forced back into their roles as housewives again initiated an identity crisis (Hansen 12). The only other trail blazers in the realm of female action characters can be found in the 1970s, if only in films catering to a niche audience, such as horror films. Neroni (27) argues that the fact that these films were

rather marginalized allowed for experimenting with controversial aspects. According to Clover (6) women in 1970s horror films can be put into two categories, namely "victim/heroes" and "final girls". The Final Girl, a character who appears in horror and slasher films, not only fights her opponent but "even kill[s] the killer on [her] own, without help from the outside" (Clover 37). The final girl's violence is often incited by men. In the slasher films of the 70s, men are often either psychotic monsters or try to protect the woman from danger and therefore either die early or only show up towards the end of the film. This absence of men makes it possible for the movie to show a woman acting violently and at the same time imply as little as possible about gender roles (Neroni 32). One of the most iconic Final Girls and arguably the blueprint of contemporary action film heroines came to the big screen in the form of Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* series. In the original *Alien* film, a horror film that is now considered a classic, Ellen Ripley is a perfect example of what Carol Clover defines as the Final Girl, in parts due to her boyishness:

> The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine – not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max. Not only the conception of the hero in *Alien* and *Aliens* but also the surname by which she is called, Ripley, owes a clear debt to slasher tradition (Clover 39).

Ultimately, Clover claims that the Final Girl's masculinity is what makes it possible for the male audience to identify with her (Clover 48). The masculinity of the Final Girl can even lie in the way *Alien's* Ellen Ripley is described, namely as "Rambette" (Brown 28) or "space-age female Rambo" (Clover 46). In her article "From 'figurative males' to action heroines" Hills criticizes the masculinization of characters like Ripley. She argues that the fact that active filmic heroines are more similar to male heroes than to traditional passive heroines does not make them figuratively male. Violence and empowerment do not make action heroines something other than women, but tell us that they are intelligent and aggressive. Both the structures of action and heroine are altered in their assemblage (45f.). The blurring of gender boundaries by women in action-heavy roles did not end with Ripley but continued with James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* in 1991. Like Ripley, Sarah Connor is more of a

stereotypical woman in the first *Terminator* film, before she becomes a terminator herself.

Portrayals of characters such as Ellen Ripley or Sarah Connor, who embody "musculinity" (Tasker, *Spectacular* 3), which is the adoption of muscles, a masculine signifier, died out in the late 1990s, when active, violent women could be found in all sorts of action films albeit in a much leaner, less muscular shape. However, compared to other genres, very few women have been featured as superheroines, especially when taking into consideration that the superhero genre has been booming since the beginning of the 2000s. At this time, there were a few female characters featured in the *X-Men* film, but apart from that, only a handful of superheroines managed to find their way to the big screen. Catwoman and Elektra are the only female main characters in superhero films of that era. While heroines in the general category of action movies have been able to gain more ground (with *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, or even with the portrayal of Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road*) superheroines lag behind, with DC's *Wonder Woman* the only notable exception (Brown, *Superhero* 51).

The titular heroines of both Marvel's *Elektra* (2005) and DC's *Catwoman* (2004) are portrayed in similar, highly sexualized ways. *Elektra* stars Jennifer Garner as a ruthless assassin, a character Garner also played in the movie *Daredevil*, which was released a year before. Elektra's costume was designed specifically to appeal to fans who were not satisfied with the costume she wore in *Daredevil* (Kent, "Elektra"). According to Kent, the media representation of *Elektra* shows some paradoxical elements. On the one hand, the media were concerned with a "modern vision of strong femininity [which] reaches back to the feminist discourses of women's empowerment," but simultaneously there was a strong focus on Garner's sex appeal and sexuality (Kent, "Elektra"). Garner was excessively sexualized in articles about the film, which most of the time had to do with the aforementioned tight costume and her fit body (Kent, "Elektra").

The hypersexualization of superheroines such as Elektra and Catwoman could, according to Heldman et al., have been their downfall. The films were box office flops and, as a consequence, it took a long time before Hollywood studios risked a female-led superhero film again (8). Still, these superhero films attempt to stay faithful to the

comics and to their unequal representations of gender. As stated by Richard J. Gray (78),

> [w]hen the superheroine is brought to film, if the creators are truly going to tap into that male sexual desire that will bring men to watch such films, she must be portrayed in a way that the male of the species (and parts of the female audience, for that matter) finds sexually appealing: lots of flesh, or in leather jumpsuits, fishnet stockings, spiked heels, etc.

More than a decade after Elektra, this is still happening to the most prominent female character in the MCU, Black Widow, who is played by Scarlett Johansson. Apart from her tight-fitting suit in the film series (although it is almost chaste in comparison to Elektra's outfit), the marketing of the films she is part of sexualizes her. In the main poster of *The Avengers*, all heroes except her are posed in a heroic way, ready to fight. She, however, stands sideways in a way all her curves are highlighted. Additionally, Marvel treats the merchandizing of their female characters differently. According to Brown (2017:55), when it comes to action figures of the characters, Black Widow or Gamora were often excluded. This disparity has been so obvious that even the actors and directors of the Marvel films have spoken out about it and have started campaigns (Brown, *Superhero* 55; White, online magazine article).[11]

Today, most action and super heroines are depicted as sexually empowered, which can be linked to the postfeminist discourse around choice, power, and sexuality (Purse, *Action Cinema* 82). When looking at recent films such as *The Avengers*, the sexual "empowerment", female characters show is still partly equated with sexiness, e. g. in the case of Black Widow. Especially films of the early 2000s show action heroines in an eroticized way – their action scenes in particular. Their costumes

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[11] Female characters being left out of merchandize also happens in other franchises, which is illustrated well in the article "#Wheresrey?: Toys, Spoilers, and the Gender Politics of Franchise Paratexts" by Suzanne Scott. The 2015 film Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens, main character, a young woman named Rey, was completely left out of the initial merchandize, since according to insiders, Rey merchandize was not taken into consideration because "[n]o boy wants to be given a product with a female character on it." This was quickly changed after fans complained online under the hashtag #wheresrey, but nevertheless it gave rise to the question of how important the ever-growing female fan-base was to the movie-makers (145). Action film merchandize is overwhelmingly advertised and pitched to the male consumer. Due to this fact, fan campaigns asking to #IncludeTheGirls (with the "girls" meaning both female characters in action movies and merchandize of female characters) or demanding #wewantwidow (again, asking for more merchandize and a stand-alone film for Black Widow) constantly emerge.

remind the viewer of "scantily-clad, hyperfeminine, gun-toting women of 1970s exploitation flicks" (Purse, *Action Cinema* 79). For second-wave feminists, the exploitation movies of the 1970s presented a serious problem because they popularized the image of women as sexual objects (79). In the context of postfeminism, the second wave feminists' reservations are not applicable anymore. The postfeminist woman is "free to express her feminine sexuality, empowered to take pleasure in participating in the sexualised display of her body either for personal or romantic purposes, because she is doing it for herself" (Purse, *Action Cinema* 83). For postfeminism, choice and individual freedom mean that women choose to be seen as sexual objects. These "discourses of self-realisation" can also be understood as violent attempts to homogenize feminist ideas about empowerment in order to push women back into capitalist hierarchies (83).

There is, however, a silver lining when it comes to the portrayal of superheroines. The last years have seen a handful of fairly successful TV-shows focusing on superheroines. *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* which centers around the agents of the MCU's government agency, is the TV-show which is closest linked to the Marvel films (its main character is Agent Coulson, a fan favorite of the films *Thor* and *The Avengers*), and it features many female characters in significant roles, some of them with superpowers. Much more importantly, however, are the series *Agent Carter*, and *Jessica Jones*, among others. *Agent Carter*, set in 1946, follows Agent Peggy Carter's (Captain America's love interest) adventures after Captain America's supposed death. Peggy Carter, although not a superhero per se, was a competent officer during WWII, who struggles to adjust to her now reduced role in the agency that later will be known as S.H.I.E.L.D. The series revolves around sexism and gender differences and Carter's constant battle against these injustices (Brown, *Superhero* 57f., IMDB). *Jessica Jones*, another fairly recent TV-series is centered on a woman with superpowers (superhuman strength, durability, and the ability to jump really high), who has given up on her superhero persona due to the horrible abuse suffered at the hands of the supervillain Kilgrave, who has the power to control minds. This series is much darker in tone than other films and series produced by Marvel and was praised for its powerful yet sensible engagement with the topic of abuse (Brown, *Superhero* 59). Both series lay the groundwork for women in the superhero genre. The lead women move away from the basic genre conventions and instead are depicted as

emancipated, not relying on men, and in the case of Jessica Jones, not relying on her powers. Brown (*Superhero* 60) argues that this might have to do with the fact that both characters are not superheroes in the sense of Batman or Captain America; and therefore, the series have more creative leeway to explore the ways women can be portrayed.[12] Unfortunately, the portrayal of female superheroes in the Marvel films is worlds apart from the relatively progressive portrayal in these series.

3. Theoretical background

The following chapters should serve as a reference for the theoretical concepts which constitute the basis of the subsequent film analysis. In order to analyze female violence in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the concept of postfeminism will be a central theoretical concept. The media are particularly skillful in depicting gender roles and gender inequality as something natural, for example casual sexism, which is even portrayed as empowering for women. Postfeminism holds the view that women are more visible and free already, hence feminism is irrelevant and even politically regressive.

Since postfeminist rhetoric can be found within the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the following chapter will therefore contain an overview of the concept of postfeminism. A further theoretical concept important for this thesis is the concept of containment strategies. These strategies can be found in postfeminist discourse, since the media promote what is desirable and use different strategies to contain what is less desirable. In the context of this thesis, this means that certain portrayals of women are preferred to others. Female characters can have a disruptive effect, but they can be disempowered for example by objectifying them. Thus, the second section of this chapter will further explain containment strategies and give examples of dominant strategies that are at work in modern action films.

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[12] The reason for his claim that neither Peggy Carter nor Jessica Jones are traditional superheroines is that Carter does not possess any powers and is not often shown using physical violence and Jessica Jones is an antihero who mostly fights for herself. On top of that, both heroines are rather unknown, so these series do not interfere with other portrayals of their characters.

3.1. Postfeminism

In her much-cited article "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime," Angela McRobbie states that

> […]post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasize that it is no longer needed, that it is a spent force ("Postfeminism" 28).

By reading critical appraisals such as the one by McRobbie one might come to the conclusion that postfeminism ultimately is a disempowering force. McRobbie does, however, refers to postfeminism as enforcing feminism (28), which concludes that postfeminism does not completely reject feminism. Indeed, postfeminism is a contradicting concept, which has its roots in the late 20th century and emerged from different cultural, academic, and political concepts. The term has been appropriated for many different definitions. In an academic context, postfeminism is described as "a shift in the understanding and constructing of identity and gender categories" (Genz and Brabon 1). The prefix "post" has long been analyzed in academics (e.g. postmodernism, poststructuralism) (2). Since "post" is attached to feminism, the prefix has gained particularly bad reputation. Many disagree over the topic of postfeminism, since the meanings, especially due to the prefix, are unsure and contradictory (3).

Genz and Brabon propose three implications the prefix "post" can have in "postfeminism." Firstly, "post" can suggest a complete rupture or a termination. In this case, postfeminism can declare the end of feminism, a "pastness" of feminism or at least the end of a particular stage (3). Furthermore, "post" can indicate a genealogy, alteration, or similarity. This is the case in "postmodernism", where the prefix is understood as a transformation. If this meaning of "post" is transferred to "postfeminism," the prefix would stand for continuity, and therefore not for a rejection but instead for a reframing of feminism (4). Thirdly, "post" can be seen as a middle ground "typified by a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows it" (4). Furthermore, in academia, postfeminism has two ways of spelling, with or without a hyphen. As Negra (2) explains:

> [P]ost-feminism trades on a notion of feminism as rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist. In contrast, postfeminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics,

postmodernism, or institutional critique […]. From the late 1990s renaissance in female-centered television series to the prolific pipeline of Hollywood 'chick flicks,' to the heightened emphasis on celebrity consumerism […] the popular culture landscape has seldom been as dominated as it is today by fantasies and fears about women's 'life choices'.

Since this thesis is concerned with the latter, the pop-cultural approach, I will use postfeminism without a hyphen.

In her article "Postfeminist Media Culture. Elements of a Sensibility," Gill attempts to explain the features of postfeminism. She argues that "[…] postfeminism is understood best neither as an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, nor (simply) as a backlash in which its meanings are pre-specified. Rather, postfeminism should be conceived as a sensibility" (148). Postfeminist discourse is composed of several features which include a preoccupation with the (female) body, a shift from sexual objectification to subjectification, surveillance of the self, an emphasis on empowerment, individualism, consumerism, and the restoration of gender differences (149).

The obsession with the body is one of the most noteworthy aspects of the postfeminist discourse. Femininity is defined by the female body, stripped away from social aspects. Sexiness is a key part of the woman's identity and power, although the body is subject to constant monitoring or surveillance (149). As Negra (4) puts it, "postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits."

Postfeminism has changed the representation of women as sexual objects. Although only a few decades ago, women were mostly depicted as sexual objects, there is a shift to depicting them as sexual subjects instead (Gill, *Postfeminist Media Culture*, 151). McRobbie (*Postfeminism* 33) adds that the shift from sexual object to sexual subject renders feminism unnecessary, which often happens in advertisements. Ads that are sexist take feminism into account since now that women are not exploited as sexual objects, they present themselves and their bodies out of choice. Additionally, being critical of this shift is impossible in the postfeminist discourse, since being prude and anti-sex is the only alternative (Gill, *Postfeminist Media Culture*, 152). Another resource postfeminist discourse has brought up to express sexist, homophobic, or

otherwise unacceptable opinions is through the use of irony (159). This also plays into the general sentiment of "having it all," since irony makes it possible to express these sentiments without really "meaning" them. With the use of irony, women can be systematically objectified and attacked, making critique almost impossible (161).

What plays into the shift to sexual subjects is individualism, especially linked to empowerment. It is up to the women alone to be or feel empowered and to "make it." This erases the possibility to be critical of systemic injustice and goes so far as to even undermine racism, homophobia or domestic violence (Gill 153, Levine 376). Therefore, postfeminism is targeted at a certain kind of woman – prosperous, privileged, and upper class – and as a result is exclusionary in nature. This exclusion derives from the interests of consumer-led capitalism and "pushes aside the experiences of those women unable by social position or circumstance to make the same kinds of choices" (Levine 376, Tasker and Negra 2). Another problem arising with the notion that women have individual freedom to feel empowered is that power imbalances or inequalities do no longer no longer seem to constrain them. This means that the empowered woman is portrayed as simply following her desire to feel good, being desirable is a way to please herself. Nevertheless, although women only follow their own desires, in terms of their body image, for example, the result is strikingly similar – hairless and slim (Gill 154). The empowerment advertised in postfeminist discourse brings with it a form of commercialization. It does not only try to naturalize feminism, but it also portrays the woman as an empowered consumer. Education and occupation for girls and women are in focus, and with that the choice of either work or being domestic, as well as the choice of sexual freedom. It also insists on the woman's choice of staying at home, not taking into account that she might be forced to work (Tasker and Negra 2).

Another stance of the postfeminist discourse is the notion of sexual difference. For a short time in the 1970s and 1980s, the similarities between men and women were highlighted in popular culture (which was also reflected in action films with the emergence of "masculinity" and characters like Sarah Connor or Ellen Ripley). This idea has since disappeared and was replaced by highlighting the natural sexual difference (Gill 158). This discourse has brought about the notion that men and women simply do not understand each other, even that they are from different planets (men

from Mars, women from Venus). These discourses, according to Gill (159), "(re-)eroticize power relations between men and women," since they construct differences as being sexy and presents these differences as inevitable or pleasurable in the right context.

The last integral feature of the postfeminist discourse is how feminism is constructed within it. Gill (161) notes that feminist ideas are part of the mainstream now, and rape, sexualization, and inequality are discussed in the media. This, however, does not mean that the media has become feminist, rather that the media "offers contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions." Angela McRobbie ("Postfeminism" 38) calls this a "double entanglement," since different feminist beliefs are at the same time included in the discussion, altered, and depoliticized. Feminist rhetoric can be found in buzzwords and slogans such as "You go, girl" or "girl power". There is a clear focus on girls and girlhood, which leads to mixing empowerment with traditionalist identity paradigms. The celebration of the young woman and treading women as girls is a further marker of this discourse. Girlhood in postfeminist culture is, to some extent, for everyone, offering a fantasy or evasion (18). At the same time, traditional feminist language is pictured as shrill, and feminist concerns are unwelcome or are even silenced (Tasker and Negra 3). In order to count as sophisticated, women are made quiet. This shift can be observed the 1990s, where the focus led away from interest in centralized power such as the patriarchy or the state, and instead towards instances of power, such as the body or the subject (McRobbie, "Postfeminism" 29). For McRobbie ("Postfeminism" 30), it is not surprising that young women distance themselves from feminism, which by now has grown into something closer to rejection than ambivalence. Levine (3) criticizes the postfeminist discourse for the inaccuracies of its characterization of second-wave feminism, since it is mostly depicted as anti-sex and anti-motherhood, ignoring the inequalities faced by women, while embracing aspects such as sexualization, and domesticity.

In contemporary media, it is precisely the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas that can be witnessed. McRobbie and Gill mention "chick lit" or the "chick flick," a recent phenomenon of books and films advertised to women. In books and films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, feminism is not ignored, but instead "simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" (Gill 161). Although these postfeminist heroines

seem more active and conscious than in earlier years, on the other hand they make problematic choices from a feminist position, since they enforce the patriarchy. Such choices include giving up work or doing all they can to try to find a husband, since there is a stigma around being single (McRobbie, "Postfeminism" 36f.) The genre of romance films reproduces the postfeminist discourse in a very obvious manner, since many of the films are concerned with the day to day lives of women. The discourse is obvious in the action genre as well, which makes it relevant for this thesis and the analysis. In her article on feminism and film violence, Coulthard (173) compares the contemporary action heroine to the femme fatale of the 1940s. Unlike the femme fatale, who reveals society's anxieties and constraints, the contemporary action heroine offers "support in a positive valuation of individualist, self-serving action." The contemporary action heroine offers the image of being innovative or revolutionary, while being completely depoliticized.

3.2. Containment strategies

A concept that ties in with postfeminism is that of strategies of containment. According to Foucault's sense of disciplinary power, these strategies are "techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal" (199). Containment strategies therefore help construct and maintain a culture that individualizes, orders and brands its subjects. These strategies of containment can be found at any historical moment, since there are always some strategies working towards a division of people. The goal of containment is obedience, or, in other words, to perform normalcy and single out those who are not normal. There are hegemonic norms and rules for different identities such as gender, ethnicity, or sexuality, and productive members of society respect those rules and norms. According to Foucault, normalization "traverses all points and supervises every instant" and "compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, and excludes" (183). In other words, containment strategies are some of the tools ideological institutions have to maintain certain norms. Since this thesis has a focus on film analysis, I will only look at containment strategies in popular culture as one of the sites where norms are established and enforced. Through the media, desirable identities are promoted, and containment strategies help exclude less desirable identities thereby helping to shape the popular discourse. In this chapter, I will therefore explain containment strategies

with regards to the postfeminist rhetoric, and I will also look at dominant containment strategies in popular culture that have depowered active women in recent action films.

In her article "Top Girls? Young Women and the Post-Feminist Sexual Contract," McRobbie defines a discourse that tries to silence feminism. She claims that due to new occupational positions for women, sexual identities, which could have been disrupted, are stabilized by retuning to normative femininity. The strategies to re-configure normative femininity become a danger for women since "[b]y these means of containment in the landscape of spectacular femininity women are removed once again from public life, the political sphere and from the possibility of feminism" ("Top Girls" 734). Sarah Projanski also identifies this tension in her article on cover girls in magazines. She suggests a model of criticism which she calls the "disruption-containment" model, which illustrates how (in the case of her article) girls can be disruptive on the one hand while simultaneously being contained by popular culture (66). She continues that:

> Many scholars writing about contemporary depictions of girls, in fact, engage this disruption-containment argument. Specifically, they build an argument about hegemony, acknowledging the way in which girls' anger about, resistance to, and transformation of social ideologies of gender, sexuality and race appear in some popular culture texts but also acknowledging that that anger, resistance, and transformation is usually "contained" in one way or another (67).

I argue that this tension between disruption and containment also holds true for female action heroines. Although they are disruptive in their presentation (since their physical power poses a threat to the existing gender norms), there are containment strategies at work to normalize them, or even to eliminate disruptive and therefore undesirable behavior. One scholar who has looked into this matter is Lisa Purse. In *Contemporary Action Cinema*, she examines different containment strategies in 2000s action film narratives (79). These strategies are in place to disempower action heroines, mostly by depicting their actions as unrealistic. This is achieved by combat styles that can be viewed as performances and are highly stylized disregarding variables such as weight or strength, or placing the action heroine in a comic frame. Through humor and comedy, situations are created that are at the same time plausible and implausible (Palmer 105). Additionally, humor usually makes the mention of taboo subjects possible (Palmer 60). Therefore, when viewing the action heroine's actions within a

comedic frame, the audience has the freedom to read her actions as implausible. Furthermore, comedy enables the action heroines to be disruptive without consequence. Purse adds that science fiction and superhero film settings also have a similar function since they are "providing a space in which female physical power is permitted, but in a fantastical setting that (with or without comedy) underlines its real-world impossibility" (81).

Purse also mentions other tendencies films include in order to contain the threat of the powerful woman, for example, the downplaying of physical consequences. Although action heroines place themselves in danger and perform incredible stunts, by the end of the action sequence, most of them look relaxed and tidy, without any sign of injuries, disheveled hair, sweat, or dirt (81). According to Purse, this tendency not only serves to preserve the heroine's status as a sexual object, but also ensures that action heroines move within the boundaries of traditional conceptions of gendered behavior. "These dictate that a woman should be feminine within certain prescribed parameters, foregoing any activities that might give rise to unladylike behaviours or body postures, such as sweating rather than 'perspiring', grunting rather than sighing, sitting with legs open instead of legs closed and so on" (82). Other containment strategies include explanatory devices to relativize female power. Marc O'Day (216) claims that the action heroine can be interpreted as overthrowing the gender binary. According to him she has a dual status: She is both an active subject and a sexual object since films take for granted that the action heroine is physically powerful and aggressive without the use of explanatory devices. Purse, on the other hand, notes that in many action films, explanatory devices (such as a maternal drive or trauma) are present (83). In respect to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, I have to agree: The action heroines of the MCU are physically capable since they have been trained by men (often against their will) and are motivated by revenge or their own trauma, hence their physical capability and aggression are justified. Similarly, in contemporary movies, the action heroine is also often placed inside a marriage, or the female action hero returns to her family at the end of the film. By doing that, the narrative takes away the woman's seeming independence and places her back into the safety of her family (84f.).

Another strategy to contain women is affluence. Purse notes that action heroines in contemporary films seem to "have it all." These characters most of the time own

expensive clothes and travel quite often, in addition to having well-paying jobs. This means that the postfeminist discourse of self-realization, as it is depicted in films such as *Kill Bill* or *Elektra,* is only available to a certain class of the population, namely white, middle-class women (83). In terms of containment, this, again, highlights the unrealistic nature of some of these portrayals: the constant availability of expensive clothes, but also means of transportation (plane tickets, etc.) sets these women apart from most "real-life" women. Additionally, other ethnicities are usually left out altogether, or they have to die in order to make way for their white colleagues (84). This containment strategy is also present when an action heroine and an action hero coexist, such as in the Matrix, where Trinity starts out as Neo's mentor, but her character does not only change into Neo's love interest, but in the end even has to make way for Neo, the hero, and dies (84). Another containment strategy found in action films is the danger of a woman showing too much agency and power. Too much power most of the time means that the heroine is unable to gain control over her powers (as seen in *X-Men: The Last Stand*) and therefore develops into a monster or a villain, who then has to be killed. One of the most widespread containment strategies is what Purse calls the "screwball comedy cycle," which consists of a weak man paired with a dominant woman. This setup, which can be found in films of the 1930s and 40s, first reads as a gender reversal, but is then diminished by the narrative – the woman is married and therefore gender roles are stabilized again (84). In summary, in order for female empowerment to be acceptable in Western culture, the action woman has to be white, heterosexual, sexualized, affluent, feminine, and narratively or cinematographically contained. Female physicality needs to be presented in a "sanitized" way, without showing signs of exertion or stress (85). Of course, not every contemporary action film fits into these categories. The last few years have brought a number of action women to the big screen who do not adhere to the aforementioned characteristics and therefore appear to be disruptive without being contained. One example is Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). She has short hair and appears to be more masculine than "action babes" of the 2000s, but still has feminine qualities. She uses motor oil as war paint, painting her forehead black. What is interesting is that the narrative and world-building hardly contain her. The *Mad Max* films play in a post-apocalyptic world, but laws of physics are still intact (the credibility of those laws of physics is at least not different than in other action films). The film is set in a desert, and Furiosa is not treated any differently than male characters: she sweats, she gets

injured, and her face is constantly dirty. However, although Furiosa could be read as a transgressive character, her life still gets saved by the male character in the end. Nevertheless, as Bampatzimopolous notes:

> Fury Road is not a breakthrough narrative that deconstructs the patriarchal world; nevertheless, Furiosa seems to be the culmination and the most challenging version of the female action hero so far, but this is definitely not the end of the patriarchal tunnel. There is still a long way to walk, a way full of conflicts, setbacks, renegotiations, frustrations, contradictions, and, hopefully, changes (217).

Although Furiosa portrays a much more transgressive and disruptive character than the MCU heroines, the Marvel superheroines are not exclusively contained in their power. The following analysis will show the tension between containment and disruption, which is present in the depiction of Marvel's superheroines.

4. Analysis

With this analysis I will take up the aforementioned issue of containment strategies. Purse claims that containment strategies "work to contain the threat embodied by the presence of the physically powerful woman" (*Action Cinema* 81). Action heroines embody a constant battle between disruption and containment. Since this tension between disruption and containment also holds true for postfeminist discourse, I will look into instances where postfeminist ideas can be found in the narrative. In doing this, I will analyze the characters' physical appearance, camera perspectives, (especially in relation to the gaze theory) and the narrative. The analysis will be divided between different containment strategies I have found throughout the films with a special focus on on-screen physicality, as seen in action scenes, or scenes leading up to action scenes.

The characters I will analyze are female characters in the films who can be called superheroines. In this case, these characters are Black Widow, Gamora, and Scarlet Witch, who all have larger roles in more than one film, but also Valkyrie, Agent Peggy Carter, Sif, and Mantis. Although Agent Carter only has short roles in the *Captain America* films and does not have a superhero identity, she nevertheless is a powerful, active woman in a superhero film. Since the MCU films focus heavily on male violence

and action, not allowing superheroines to have much screen time, I decided to use every superheroine and active female character in the films for this analysis.

4.1. "I want one" – Sexualization and objectification

Sexualization is what Purse (*Action Cinema* 81f.) uses as an example of a containment strategy. She mentions that this sexualization impacts the narrative in multiple ways: fighting styles are more fluid, flowing, and feminine, and bodily feats are not acknowledged, since signs of physical exhaustion are hardly ever shown. In the films of the MCU, this is only partly the case, but a tendency of preserving women's bodies in a way that they stay nice to look at is still present. Almost every female character in the MCU is sexualized in some instances, which is also noticeable when it comes to the films' marketing.[13] The most blatantly sexualized character out of the small number of superheroines in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is Black Widow. This is already obvious when it comes to marketing: on the poster for *Iron Man 2* (2010), her body is displayed in a way that shows all her curves. She wears a black, tight leather suit and the curves of her breasts and buttocks are highlighted. Interestingly, on the right-hand side of the poster, Iron Man's assistant and love interest Pepper Potts is shown in a more neutral pose with less focus on her curves. There is also less focus on Potts' body throughout the films, while *Iron Man 2* marks the beginning of Black Widow's status as a sex symbol. Although this has become less obvious in newer films, there are still instances of her being objectified. In this section, I therefore want to analyze Black Widow's first entrance in *Iron Man 2* and compare it to *The Avengers*. I will also touch upon sexualization of other female characters in the movies. Although the first half of this analysis focuses on sexualization in association with camera angles and the body as a focal point, the second part will address sexualization in conversations or comments in the films. In conclusion, I will tie these instances of sexualization to a postfeminist rhetoric.

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[13]In addition to Black Widow, who is shown in very sexy poses that highlight her breasts and hips on posters for *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Agent Peggy Carter is shown in a rather suggestive pose compared to the male characters on the poster for *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), as well as Gamora on various posters for *The Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* (2014) and *The Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017). As far as *The Avengers* is concerned, there has been online outcry over an *Avengers* poster that showed Black Widow from behind while all the other Avengers completely faced the camera. It was redrawn to have Black Widow as the only person facing the camera with her whole body, while her male teammates showed their behinds (Macdonald, online magazine article).

Sexualization in film cannot be touched upon without mentioning the male gaze theory. In her 1975 essay, Mulvey comes to the conclusion that representations of women in Hollywood only serve the male gaze, since these representations are manifestations of the "patriarchal unconscious" (833). Men's desires are conveyed by projecting them on the active male character as well as scopophilia, the pleasure of looking at the female body through the male gaze (836). The viewer, who is assumed to be heterosexual and male, acquires pleasure from looking at the passive female character. The male protagonist acts as a surrogate for him, thus the viewer does not only see himself in the male hero, but is also able to act out fantasies with the female character (837). Although in the case of Black Widow or other superheroines, they are not passive characters, but physically active characters with their own agendas, in terms of looking and being looked at, they are passive. Mulvey argues that the spectator has the privilege of being invisible, so he can look without being looked at (844). The woman, therefore, becomes the object of sexual desire. The visual presence of the female character stops the storyline in order to focus on her appearance. Instances of Black Widow being framed by the camera in an objectifying way are consistent throughout the film. Only very rarely are there close shots of her without showing parts of her body, and most of the time her body is positioned in a way that accentuates her breasts.

When the audience is first introduced to Black Widow, it is through the gaze of Tony Stark/Iron Man early in *Iron Man 2* (2010), after Tony Stark decides to make Pepper Potts, his assistant, the CEO of his company, Stark Industries. Tony and his friend Happy are in a boxing ring, when Pepper informs Tony that the notary is here to sign some paperwork concerning signing over the company. Immediately it is made clear that Black Widow, who is undercover as the notary Natalie Rushman, is good-looking; directly after her appearance, there is a reaction shot of Tony and Happy, who were talking about boxing styles only a moment ago. Happy looks up at her, and Tony turns around and does the same.

It is clear at once that, indeed, when Black Widow enters the room, the story seems to be halted for a moment. There is a mid-shot of her standing and looking back at them, before she enters the room, dressed in a form-fitting blouse and black pants.

Tony even receives a friendly hit on the head from Happy as he continues staring at her. Happy tells him to "never take your eye off" but before he can finish, he is punched by Tony, who immediately invites Black Widow/Natalie into the boxing ring, which is excused by Pepper with an "I'm sorry, he's very eccentric." She nevertheless gets into the ring, with the camera following her smooth movements, the angle highlighting her behind. There are a few close-ups of Tony and Black Widow looking at each other, until Tony seems to grow increasingly uneasy and leaves the ring, instructing Happy to teach her a few moves.

At this point, Tony takes on the role of the spectator, even sitting down with Pepper and watching her from a distance. The focus on her body is accented by the disinterest Tony shows in what Pepper is telling him: while Pepper tells Tony about potential assistants for him and looks at Happy and Black Widow. This action is underlined by an eyeline match, a medium long shot of the boxing ring. Next, Happy asks Black Widow if she has ever boxed before, and when she tells him she has he answers with: "What, like the Tae Bo, Booty Boot Camp, crunch, something like that?" Before she can answer, Tony asks her to spell her name, and promptly googles her. He tells Pepper that she is a "very impressive individual, she's fluent in French, Italian, Russian, Latin," but pulls up modeling photos of her, in which she is only dressed in lingerie. Black Widow turns around when she hears Tony and Pepper talking about her. Happy, already questioning her abilities (when she tells him that she has boxed before, attempts to exploit this moment of negligence, by telling her to "never take your eyes off the opponent" – just as he told Tony. However, Black Widow overpowers him in seconds, which is met with a reaction shot of Pepper and Tony, exclaiming surprise. Even when Black Widow steps out of the boxing ring in order to collect Tony's fingerprints for some document, her breasts are highlighted, and when she leaves the room, Tony and Pepper gaze after her, Tony exclaiming, "I want one" and Pepper telling him no (*Iron Man 2* 00:23:44-00:26:09).

This scene sets the tone for the presentation of Black Widow's character. She is instantly elevated to a 'sex symbol' status, not only because of her outfit, looks, or movement, but also because of Tony Stark taking on the role of the spectator. Tony Stark as a spectator serves multiple purposes in this scene: As already mentioned, he establishes Black Widow's status as a sexual object. This happens not only by him

sitting in front of the boxing ring and looking at her, making her the object to be looked at while she is immediately punished by Happy's attempt at teaching her a lesson for looking back at Tony. Tony also undresses her not only by his looks, but also by googling her and therefore showing the audience her half naked body. This, combined with his exclamations that he wants and needs her, put her in the passive role, although she shows great skill and physical strength. Another purpose Tony serves as the spectator is that he puts enough distance between him and Black Widow. Black Widow only defeats Happy in the boxing ring, not the titular hero, therefore proving her strength without decreasing Iron Man's strength. Black Widow not having to defeat Iron Man/Tony Stark also makes it easy to view her as a sex symbol, since, ultimately, she is strong, but does not mean any harm. This scene, as well as the following scenes, also serves as a good example for Purses' containment strategies, since Purse mentions fluent fighting styles and no signs of physical exhaustion. Indeed, both of these examples are found in the scene. Black Widow's fighting style, while only on screen for a few seconds, is very fast and fluid, and while it is more realistic than earlier examples of action and superhero films (e.g. *Elektra*, *Charlie's Angels, Lara Croft*), her style reminds the viewer of martial arts, as is almost a tradition for female characters in contemporary action films in the early 2000s[14]. When it comes to exhaustion, the stark difference between Black Widow and Happy must also be noticed. While Happy lies on the ground, panting and sweating, or at least with a somewhat flushed face, Black Widow struts out of the boxing ring, adjusting her blouse but otherwise without any sign of physical exhaustion (*Iron Man 2* 00:25:30-00:35:36).

The second scene I will analyze takes place in the beginning of *The Avengers*, where the intrinsic link between sex and power can be found again. Once more, Black Widow is introduced as the sexy but powerful spy and the film finds her handcuffed and bound to a chair, barefoot, and wearing only a dress while she is interrogated by three men in an empty warehouse. An establishing shot shows her surrounded by at least two men. It is dark, but there is a lamp directly above her, so that her cleavage as well as her red hair are visible even from far away. The camera zooms in and cuts to a close-up of Black Widow's face being hit. In the next cut, she is panting, the camera changes to a mid-shot to show her side, as she leans her head back. Sweat can be seen on

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[14] Examples of women using martial arts in action films, apart from *Charlie's Angels* and *Elektra*, are *Kill Bill* or the *Matrix* trilogy, as well as *Daredevil* and *Catwoman*. Elements of martial arts in physical action can also be found in the *X-Men* films.

her skin and, for a moment, Black Widow seems to be in serious trouble. Her outfit and the dialogue imply that she had been undercover as a hostess, but her cover blew. The camera angles used are mid-shots and full shots from different perspectives, to establish not only that the chair she is sitting on is only inches away from a hole in the floor, but that there are three, not two, men towering over her. Interestingly, next to her is a chandelier and its light highlights her breasts and thighs.

When the men come closer, a reverse full-shot shows her muscled back and toned arms. Although she is unable to defend herself, her voice is composed and not frightened, and she even tries to threaten the men. When they want to know who she works for, one of them leans back her chair. The camera is situated on a high angle, so that Black Widow, still with her cleavage in focus, is positioned in front of the brink, with the man at her side towering over her, his leather jacket the only thing visible of him. Here, Black Widow is in an incredibly powerless position, as she looks almost fearfully up to her captor. A close-up of her feet shows them losing the floor underneath them. While the oldest man continues threatening her, the scene cuts to a mirror, obviously leaning on a wall nearby, showing Black Widow from behind and the men talking to her. This mirror could act as a foreshadowing device of what is to come: the older man makes fun of her, calls her "another pretty face" and indicates that her beauty would be destroyed by them soon. They mention pulling out her teeth and an atmosphere of suspense is created, which is interrupted by a cellphone ringing. There is an immediate tone shift, when one of the men picks up, and, confused by the request, hands the phone over to Black Widow. By now it is clear that Agent Coulson, a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, is on the line. He threatens the man to blow up the building if they do not put Black Widow on the phone and he complies. A cut to Black Widow finds her more annoyed than frightened. She tells him that the situation is completely under control and "this moron is giving me everything." Already, the roles are reversed when the man in question looks confused, stammering "I don't… give her everything" and Black Widow, in a reverse shot, only arches her eyebrows. When Agent Coulson tells her that Barton, her teammate, "has been compromised," she tells him to "Let me put you on hold." Now, in a series of fast cuts, Black Widow soon manages to not only use the chair she is handcuffed to as a weapon, but also to knock out everyone, but not without putting her body into focus in various mid-shots that have her shaking breasts in focus. Here, Black Widow shows the fighting style Purse mentioned: it is

heavily influenced by Martial Arts, with many graceful movements but at the same time accentuated with high jumps. Her combat style is distinctive in that she mostly uses her legs in order to choke people. After tying the last man to a chain and letting him dangle, she picks up the cellphone and her shoes before leaving the building (*The Avengers* 00:12:03-00:14:53).

This scene is interesting as a contrast to the "boxing scene" in *Iron Man 2*, since, although the premise is similar, Black Widow is in a more empowered role in the latter scene. Of course, apart from showing her abilities, her outfit and the dialogue's focus on her appearance undermine them by putting her appearance in the foreground. From this perspective, both scenes are much alike: Black Widow is underestimated by two or more men, she presents herself as innocent, until it is possible for her to prove herself. The difference, however, is the presence of the male gaze. In the "boxing scene," Tony's gaze is on Black Widow constantly, and even after she defeats Happy, he still thinks of her as an object, as he exclaims "I want one." Black Widow seems to fulfill his fantasies of a sexy and capable assistant. In the "warehouse scene" in *The Avengers*, however, Black Widow, although being objectified, turns out to a threat to her captors. The male gaze is present, but not as obvious, since there are hardly any eyeline matches, even though the focus on Black Widow's body, especially her breasts, sexualizes her. When she starts fighting back, in contrast to the "boxing scene," there is no male spectator left. The only person who witnesses the scene is Agent Coulson, but he is only able to hear what is going on.

Another difference is the fact that there is visible exertion in Black Widow's case since she sweats, grunts, and breathes loudly in the "warehouse scene," This is not to say that the strategy to use sexualization as a form of containment cannot be found here, since Black Widow is still sexualized. Her moves are a bit too graceful and fluid to be realistic and the scene still plays with an element of surprise (namely that a woman can be powerful) that should be an outdated stereotype. Nevertheless, this scene shows that within the MCU there are changes happening. In later films of the Marvel Universe, Black Widow gets to play with her appearance again, but not in a way that

sexualizes her[15]. *The Avengers* seems to have ultimately established her capability as a fighter, so that scenes, such as the one described above, seem unnecessary.

Black Widow is not the only female character in the film series suffering from sexualization, although sexualization is most apparent with her. Another character frequently sexualized is Gamora in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2.* She is similar to Black Widow, not only in terms of her looks but also her history.[16] Quite early in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1*, Gamora, a green-skinned but otherwise attractive assassin dressed in black leather, tries to snatch the orb, a mysterious object that can be sold for a high price, from Peter Quill, the film's protagonist. The scene starts with Peter Quill/Starlord being thrown out of the shop where he wanted to sell the orb.. A mid-shot reveals Gamora seductively leaning against a wall, eating an apple-like fruit. She starts a conversation with Quill, who is staring at her, and immediately tells her that the shopkeeper threw him out. In this scene, the male gaze is apparent: The camera switches between Quill and Gamora, and while Gamora is captured in mid-shots, showing most of her body, Quill is shown in close-ups, with only his head and shoulders in the frame. The scene also includes a medium-close up from over Quill's shoulder, to match his eyeline. Gamora keeps flirting with Quill and slowly comes closer to him. When she tells him that he has "the bearing of a man of honor," Quill starts rambling, apparently flattered, and starts playing with the orb, throwing it up and catching it, just like a ball. Here, the focus shifts to an over-the-shoulder shot from Gamora's point of view, but different than before, the mid-shot of Quill is from a low angle (Gamora was filmed from a high angle). Gamora snatches the orb from Quill with a kick into his stomach and, as soon as Quill is inattentive, runs away (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* 00:17:45-00:18:11).

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[15] In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)*, she infiltrates a meeting of the World Security Council by posing as one of its members, councilwoman Hawley. She uses a special mask called Photostatic Veil, a thin veil of programmable holographic cells, as well as a wig to pose as the middle aged woman. Here, once again, the audience as well as her enemies are surprised when she commences fighting, but it is only until she reveals her true identity.

[16] Both Gamora and Black Widow wear black leather suits as their fighting gear. While Black Widow's suit has a zipper to expose her cleavage, Gamora has one set of clothes bearing a "breast window" and one which has see-through parts made from mesh. Additionally, both characters had to undergo severe training when they were young – Gamora was captured by the Titan Thanos, who trained her to be an assassin, and Black Widow underwent the Red Room training in Soviet Russia to become a spy.

Gamora's character as well as the way she is presented are very similar to Black Widow. Gamora also uses her looks and "sex-appeal" to have men underestimate her. It is interesting, however, that although the audience knows about Gamora's skills (as she is introduced earlier in the movie), she is still filmed in a way that puts her in an inferior position, by not only enabling the male gaze, having the camera at a high angle, looking down on Gamora, but also by shooting Quill from a low angle (the over-the-shoulder shot from Gamora's point of view is technically not over the shoulder, since the camera is approximately at her waist). While the male gaze is very apparent in this scene, what immediately draws attention away from it is her combat style. Her movements, while fluent, are not as graceful or rehearsed-looking as Black Widow's, as Gamora has a very impact-heavy style. When she kicks Quill in the stomach, but also in the subsequent scene when Quill runs after her, she grunts and makes a series of sounds that resemble karate and will be revisited in chapter 5.3. It can therefore be concluded that exertion is shown, just as in *The Avengers*.

In her article on postfeminist media culture, Gill explains that one characteristic of postfeminism is a shift from sexual object to sexual subject. She claims that "[w]omen are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so" (151). I argue that not only is this shift noticeable in some instances of the movies, but that this shift also partly contributes to the superheroines' containment. Through the use of low camera angles and a constant focus on the female body, sexual objectification is still apparent in these scenes. Out of the women in the MCU, Gamora and Black Widow seem to display this shift of sexual objectification to subjectification the most. Most of their success seems to be built around their way of leading men on and playing the dumb but sexy girl in order to extract information. In the case of Black Widow, this is shown several times. She knows the impact she has on men, which is very apparent in both her first scene in *Iron Man 2* and her first scene in *The Avengers*. When she is bound to the chair in *The Avengers* and one of the men tell her that she is "just another pretty face," she asks, with an innocent and quivering voice, "You think I'm pretty?" Her innocence, however, quickly vanishes when she fights the men only moments later (*The Avengers* 00:12:03-00:14:53). What this also shows is that the shift between objectification and subjectification is a thin line: since Black Widow and Gamora take advantage of

themselves being sexualized, it is therefore hard to distinguish between sexual objectification and subjectification. Sexual subjectification could therefore easily be read as powerful. Gill, however, warns of this shift, since sexual subjectification brings with itself certain dangers:

> [O]nly *some* women are constructed as active, desiring sexual subjects: women who desire sex with men (except when lesbian women 'perform' for men) and only young, slim and beautiful women. […] Above all, to critique this is to highlight the pernicious connection of this representational shift to neoliberal subjectivities in which sexual objectification can be (re-)presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects (152f.).

For media representation of sexual subjectification, this means that although Black Widow or Gamora could be argued to be in a position of power by freely choosing to present themselves as sexually desirable and therefore getting what they want, for women this means that they can be blamed for being objectified because they "want it that way." Especially now that victims of sexual assault have started speaking up and this topic is at the center of attention, it is important to critique media representation of sexual subjectification.

The female characters in the MCU are not only exposed to the male gaze and a constant focus on their bodies. Another way these characters are sexualized and objectified is by sexist comments made by male characters. This is especially apparent in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1*, where Gamora has to endure sexist comments various times. While in prison and planning how to get out, Rocket, the talking raccoon, suggests that she could trade her freedom for sex, saying that: "Well, supposedly these bald-bodies find you attractive. So maybe you can work out a deal" (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* 00:34:35-00:34:43). Interestingly, not every character is allowed to be blatantly sexist. While Tony Stark/ Iron Man, was very obviously depicted as a playboy in the first two *Iron Man* films and was especially sexist in regard to Black Widow, his sexism was written out of the succeeding films. He is still allowed to make sexual innuendos every now and then, but they are relatively tame to characters such as Rocket. Also Quill, who heavily flirts with women throughout the films, is not allowed to cross a certain line. I argue that this is due to both Quill and Tony Stark being the

main male heroes in their respective films. They are not allowed to be too misogynist, in order to still be interesting enough for women.[17]

This is not true for all male characters, though. Due to Rocket's status of an enhanced animal with a very foul character, his words, especially when it comes to sexism or other insults, seem to have less of an impact, since Rocket is not expected to find a love interest. The same is true for Drax, who is part of an alien race with no sense for subtlety or rhetorical devices. When he calls Gamora a "green whore," it is only countered with an "Oh, you must stop" (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* 1:29:05-1:29:07), but otherwise the comedic tone of the scene is preserved. A similar example is Loki, the villain in *The Avengers*. He is captured in a high security cell, where he cannot use his magical powers. Black Widow, who wants to find out his plans, engages him in conversation, which ends with Loki calling her a "mewling quim" (*The Avengers* 1:03:40-1:07:02). Again, although Black Widow seems to be taken aback by this exclamation, it is not discussed at any later point. Loki's behavior is also within the scope of acceptance, since he is the villain and, additionally, he is from Asgard, the home of the Norse gods and therefore is not expected to follow the same social rules. Since the most sexist comments and behavior are limited to either villains or characters with no comprehension of (western) human society, it seems that this way, the more prominent superhero characters' casual sexism becomes less apparent.

The reaction to casual sexism, or lack thereof, is reminiscent of postfeminist ideas. As McRobbie (34) claims,

> [t]hus, the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl. Indeed, this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool and, more precisely, an uncritical relation to dominant, commercially produced, sexual representations that actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation, and pleasure, free of politics.

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[17] Both Quill and Stark have love interests in the films – Pepper Potts becomes Tony Stark's girlfriend by the end of *Iron Man 2*, and Quill and Gamora have a "will they, won't they" relationship but finally confess their feelings to each other in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018).

With Robbie's claim in mind, it is no wonder that casual remarks are hardly given any counter. When Happy cannot take his eyes off Black Widow changing her wardrobe in the backseat while he is driving, Black Widow just tells him to keep his eyes on the street (*Iron Man 2* 1:40:32-1:40:36), but there are no instances in any of the films where there is actual protest, apart from some annoyed remark, when female characters are put on the receiving end of sexism or objectification.

4.2.   "Let me put you on hold" – Comedy and humor

The films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe are packed with comedic elements such as jokes and visual comedy. In fact, comedic elements are a huge part of the most action-heavy climactic scenes, to a point where Marvel is critiqued for using too much humor in its films.[18] Most of the comedic elements are one-liners or witty remarks, for example in the beginning of a superhero film, the "training montage" scene, when a new superhero tests their powers for the first time and for most of the duration of the scene fails horribly, is also played for laughs (TV Tropes, wiki). When it comes to female superheroes, who have less screen time than their male counterparts, these comedic elements can act as a containment strategy, since "[p]lacing the female action hero within a comic frame allows the film and the viewer the freedom to position her acts as implausible elements" (Purse, *Action Cinema* 80). In general, action scenes with female characters that are intentionally funny are rare in the Marvel films, which is interesting, considering male characters regularly contribute to the comedic undertone of the films. Nevertheless, throughout the films, the comedic elements I have found concerning female characters can be placed into two categories, which I will now explain.

The first category of comedy important for the containment of female characters is comedy at the expense of a male character, in other words the underestimation of the female character. In general, scenes with this comedic element have a certain

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[18] The MCU films are often compared to the much darker and different films of the DC universe, for example the *Dark Knight* or *Man of Steel* series. After the success of the Iron Man movies, the humor displayed in these movies was used in other installments, too. This has led to the criticism that many characters, such as Doctor Strange or Thor, do not have a distinctive form of humor anymore. A further criticism has to do with Marvel's excessive use of comedy. Although the films are very entertaining as a whole, the high number of jokes and funny remarks means that more serious scenes hardly have any impact (see Kuchera, Fullerton).

structure: A male character and a female character are placed together in a scene. The male character either wants to protect the female character or thinks he is physically superior. The female character completely outperforms the male character in a very short time, and it ends with a reaction shot of the male character, confused or baffled. There are a few scenes in *Iron Man 2* and *The Avengers* that have Black Widow show off her powers just as explained.

The first scene would be the aforementioned "boxing scene," Black Widow's first scene in *Iron Man 2*, with her knocking out Happy in the boxing ring (*Iron Man 2* 00:24:26-00:25-40). Interestingly, even after this incident, Happy is still not quite convinced by Black Widow's abilities. A little later in the film, Black Widow and Happy are on their way to break into Hammer Industries. Black Widow insists on going in alone, but Happy does not let her and goes with her. The building is full of security guards and Happy immediately starts a fistfight with one of them. In crosscuts, the audience sees Black Widow, knocking out one security guard after another in a series of highly unrealistic moves that give the scene a very choreographed character, while Happy is still fighting the first security guard. Black Widow's movements are in slow motion, some shots in a bird's eye perspective, and she is shown in typical superhero poses. The scene ends with Happy finally overpowering the security guard. He excitedly exclaims: "I got him!" before the next shot reveals a hallway full of unconscious bodies, with one man even dangling from the ceiling. The last shot is a reaction shot from Happy, staring in disbelief (*Iron Man 2* 1:41:51-1:43:44). While the scene shows Black Widow's powers, Happy acts as a catalyst of her physical abilities. His fighting style and apparent physical power is in constant comparison to hers. Since Black Widow's style is similar to martial arts, her actions seem highly unrealistic in this scene.[19] Additionally, focusing on Happy's reaction in the end takes the emphasis away from her abilities. Happy is puzzled, the audience laughs, and the next scene starts before the audience has time to process that Black Widow managed to take out a dozen men in two minutes.

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[19] Black Widow's style combines elements from different martial arts, such as kung fu, muay thai, but also professional wrestling. It is, however, hard to pinpoint exact styles for Black Widow, since in most of her earlier scenes there is an emphasis on poses, but her actual techniques are not shown.

In *The Avengers*, Black Widow's previously mentioned scene in the warehouse is played for laughs as soon as it is clear that Black Widow is in full control of the situation. When the phone rings, there is an immediate tone shift, since the Russian men's reactions shift from serious to confused. The "warehouse scene" is a good example for Purse's claim about comedy acting as an implausible element, since the scene becomes absurd as soon as Black Widow is on the phone with Agent Coulson: when Black Widow is handed the phone, she is still bound to the chair where she, only moments ago, was threatened and almost tortured. The camera angles stay the same – close-ups from the side with her cleavage in focus and full shots from a low angle so that the older Russian man standing in front of her is only discernible as a dark, threatening silhouette. Nevertheless, she seems annoyed rather than threatened when she tells Coulson that she is "[…]in the middle of an interrogation. This moron is giving me everything." Her line makes the audience realize that this is not Black Widow being interrogated, but rather the one conducting the interrogation of the three Russians and therefore in control of the situation. Nevertheless, the camera setup is the same as before and still does not change, but instead puts the scene in the same threatening and sexualizing light as before, even when there is a close-up of Black Widow's face, raising her eyebrow. When Agent Coulson can convince her to stop the interrogation and tells Agent Coulson "Let me put you on hold," she immediately begins knocking out the three men in the warehouse. To further underline the comedic element of this scene, the audience gets to see Agent Coulson's reaction, in a cross-cut. He gives an impressed, albeit impatient nod, establishing that he knows exactly how capable Black Widow is. The Russian men interrogating her, however, are taken by surprise and do not have any chance against her (*The Avengers* 00:12:03-00:14:53).

Scenes such as the "warehouse scene" also appear in other MCU films. One further example is Agent Peggy Carter in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Peggy Carter is the Operations Supervisor Agent in the Strategic Scientific Reserve and is working on the project that would eventually make Steve Rogers into a scientifically enhanced "super soldier" and, eventually, Captain America. The scene in question again seeks to establish Agent Carter's capability as well as physical strength, similarly to Black Widow's aforementioned scenes: the potential candidates for the super soldier program all stand in line as Agent Carter walks before them and introduces herself as

the supervisor of all operations for the division. She has a British accent, which one soldier, Hodges, immediately remarks upon. He speaks up, asking her "What's with the accent, Queen Victoria?" This leads to Agent Carter telling him to step forward and punch him so he lands in the dirt. This is met with laughter at Hodges' expense and a remark by Colonel Chester Philips, who applauds her for "breaking in the candidates" (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 00:19:51-00:20:27).

There is a second category of comedy which can be found in the MCU, namely comedy at the expense of the female character, or in other words, her incapability. In the wider range of the MCU, this type of comedic effect has happened often, with characters unable to activate their weapons, missing targets etc. When it comes to the female characters, however, it is a trope one is hardly able to find. Interestingly, this trope is only found outside of the main cast, so neither Black Widow, Gamora, nor Scarlet Witch ever experience incapability, but there are a few instances found in scenes featuring characters of the supporting cast. The first scene, found in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2,* strictly speaking does not feature a female character enacting violence. Mantis, an empath who can manipulate emotions around her, fights alongside the Guardians in order to stop Ego, Peter Quill's evil father. Since she can manipulate feelings, she is able to put him to sleep, buying the others time to find a way to defeat him. However, due to Ego's immense powers, her abilities only work with physical contact, so she has to touch him in order to keep him asleep. Mantis shifts out of focus for the fight scene (the heroes have to fight not only Ego but also other opponents, and due to Ego being stopped it gives them time to defeat the others). A few minutes later, the focus is back on Mantis who is still kneeling and trying to keep Ego from waking up. The film's main theme is played while the others are gathering next to her. The heroes have just found out a way to defeat Ego, and while assembling around Mantis, they adopt poses that reflect the film's posters.[20] The camera zooms out to establish the Guardians' heroic moment, but the music is abruptly cut off when a rock hits Mantis on the head. Of course, this means that she is tossed away from Ego, who regains consciousness again (*Guardians of the Galaxy*

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[20] Scenes like this, with the heroes assembling in their superhero stances can be noticed throughout the films. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2014), the Avengers jump across the screen in slow-motion, before the title card is superimposed. Normally, these scenes do not stop with one team member being hurt.

Vol. 2 1:44:00-1:44:34). The way the music is cut off and the absurdity of the scene (Mantis being hit by a rock and not by one of the countless missiles that had been used earlier) only furtherly underline the scene as attempting to be humorous. Mantis, who is underestimated throughout the whole film, especially by Drax, who calls her a "groce buglady," ugly and weak. Although the characterization of almost all of the characters in the MCU differs greatly from the comics, in the case of Mantis this difference is especially astounding, since in the comics, Mantis is a skilled fighter, whereas in the film, she is not even given the chance to prove herself, instead she is immediately knocked out and remains unconscious throughout the climactic fight.

Mantis stands in direct contrast to Valkyrie, the only other female character who is presented as incapable at one point in the movies. Valkyrie, who makes her debut in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), is a former Asgardian warrior who makes her living as the bounty hunter Scrapper 142 on the planet Sakaar, where Thor is stranded in the third *Thor* installment. When Thor is deposited at Sakaar, he is immediately approached by scavengers, who ask him if he is a fighter or food. He gets captured by them with an electrified net and is deemed food until a spaceship appears and stops directly in front of the scavengers. Upbeat music plays while the ship's entrance opens, and Valkyrie appears for the first time. She can immediately be recognized as a warrior, with leather clothing and war paint on her face. For a moment, she stands at the entrance, drinking liquor from a glass bottle while the camera zooms in on her, and a reaction shot of the scavengers shows them watching her warily. She takes another gulp out of the bottle. It is already clear that Valkyrie is depicted differently from the other female characters. She does not wear an overly sexualized outfit (it is not as form-fitting as Black Widow or Gamora's suits), and she has a broader, more muscular frame. Additionally, she is shown drinking, which is a characteristic primarily associated with the male Marvel characters (and with masculinity in general).[21] She walks towards them, claiming that Thor is hers. However, she staggers and the music stops when she falls off her spaceship and right into some kind of alien cadaver. The scavengers immediately turn away and huddle together, but unlike Mantis in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, Valkyrie's incapability is only of short nature. She stands up and powers up her

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[21]In the MCU, only Thor and Tony Stark/Iron Man are regularly shown drinking alcohol.

vambraces, which enable her to control the ship's cannons. With that, she immediately kills the scavengers, leaving only Thor alive (*Thor: Ragnarok* 00:26:40-00:30:22).

The category comedy poses an interesting problem. As I have established, when it comes to scenes connected with violence and action, two broad categories of comedy can be found involving female characters in the MCU. However, most of the comedic scenes show female characters being underestimated by men and only a few scenes can be found where female characters show any kind of incapability. I support Purse's claim that comedy is a frame of containment for female characters because it renders their actions implausible, as can be seen with characters such as Black Widow in *Iron Man 2*. Happy, who is used as the inept counterpart of Black Widow in two scenes, is almost too extreme as a contrast, since, in the end, his incompetence almost overshadows Black Widow's capability, and, at the same time, her skills are depicted as almost unbelievable even within the superhero genre. Furthermore, comedy at the expense of the female character, as seen with Mantis, can have a degrading effect. Mantis, although she proved useful due to her powerful empath skills, has to spend the rest of the fight unconscious, unable to fully unfold her skillset. Additionally, Drax' constant degrading and belittling of her and her abilities also takes power from her.

What I would argue, nevertheless, is that although comedy can undermine female action heroes' power, the lack of comedic elements can play a similar role. In *Thor: Ragnarok*, the character Valkyrie is perceived as well-rounded and powerful. Part of it, I claim, is due to the fact that she is depicted not unlike a male character, especially by the use of comedic effects. She is allowed to fail, but instead of being branded as powerless or a damsel in distress, she is nevertheless shown as powerful, since she is able to prove herself and show her skills. I would therefore say that in the case of Valkyrie, comedy does not act as a frame of containment, because she is not treated any differently from other characters in the film. There is a large amount of comedy at the expense of Thor or his brother Loki, and the film as a whole is very light-hearted and full of jokes, so even if comedy renders Valkyrie's actions implausible, it is not at all different from the other characters. Of course, in a comedic action film like *Thor: Ragnarok*, including a strong and well-written female character is not as disruptive, since placing a film in a comedic genre already renders it more unbelievable. Nevertheless, if female characters get treated differently from their male counterparts,

(as is the case especially with superheroines in larger roles such as Black Widow, Gamora, and Scarlet Witch), for example by not being allowed to fail, being depicted as incompetent or as anything other than capable and powerful heroines, this also contains them and renders them unbelievable. In contrast to the male characters, the superheroines come off as flawless at times, which takes depth from their characterization and, as a consequence, disempowers them. I would therefore also argue that if male and female characters are treated similarly in terms of comedy, the containing effect is smaller. Comedies already have a containing effect on women, since comedic characters as well as a comedic setting construct situations that are at the same time plausible and implausible. However, placing serious, capable women in overall comedic films also acts as a containment frame, since it renders the female character an untouchable being which makes it hard for the female audience to identify with her.

4.3. "I have a very specific skill set" – Physical power and believability

Films within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, similar to superhero films in general, always use up much of their screen time to display the heroes' physical power in relation to "normal" humans, supervillains, and, to a degree, other heroes. As already established, the active women of the MCU are displayed for the most part as capable and powerful. Physical power, however, acts as another containment frame. In her article on "Return of the Angry Woman: Authenticating Female Physical Action in Contemporary Cinema," Purse (190) claims that physicality is framed in a way that reasserts "conservative behavioural 'norms' that disconnect the feminine from the perpetration of physical aggression." In action films, this is often achieved by rendering the heroine's actions unbelievable in terms of physics. As mentioned earlier, real-world laws of physics and physiology are ignored, and "the consequences of bodily momentum, weight, and collision that would be present in a more realistic rendering of the action are not conveyed" (190). Additionally, the action heroine is rarely visibly hurt or exhausted. She hardly shows any signs of sweat, does not breathe heavily, and, most importantly, signs of bodily impact such as bleeding wounds or bruises are reduced to a minimum. Small cuts are shown more commonly than major injuries (190). When injuries happen, the face remains undamaged, wounds are more likely to

occur on other body parts, such as the arm, whereas aside from a small amount of dirt or some mussed hair, the head and especially the face of the action heroine remains unaffected (Purse, "Return" 185).

In the superhero genre, where almost all characters display some amount of superhuman powers that defy physics, Purse's arguments have a double meaning: placing female characters in a world with distinct science fiction and fantasy elements, where they can have powers that would be impossible in real-world standards, of course already acts as a containment strategy. By placing the possibly disruptive female character into this unrealistic setting, her actions become less disruptive, because they are clearly unreal. Moreover, within the fantasy world of these superheroes, the female character once more becomes contained in her power due to how her powers are presented compared to male superheroes. In this chapter, I will explore the difference between male and female physicality, since I claim that despite the superhero setting where both male and female characters possess a certain degree of unbelievable powers, physical power is still gendered. I will therefore look into the use of weapons and fighting styles, as well as the characters' superpowers and compare them both to each other and to Purses' claims.

In terms of fighting styles, there is a long tradition of martial-arts-type fighting styles when it comes to female action heroes given the fact that most films try to retain women's femininity. This means that women most often stay within certain parameters of behavior. Purse (*Action Cinema* 82) notes that "the fighting styles of these women also correspond to these dictates, the fluid, flowing, more 'feminine' movements of martial arts often chosen above 'macho' guns and punches." In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the degree to which female superheroes stay within these parameters of femininity is very different. Fighting styles range from very stereotypically feminine to rather atypical. The character closest to the typical graceful, feminine action heroine is Black Widow. Interestingly, when she talks about her skills in *The Avengers*, she underlines her ruthlessness: "Before I worked for S.H.I.E.L.D., I, well, I made a name for myself. I have a very specific skill set. I didn't care who I used it for, or on." (*The Avengers* 1:04:29-1:04:42).As already touched on above, her fighting style mostly resembles martial arts. This, however, has changed throughout the films. In Black Widow's first appearance in *Iron Man 2*, she relies almost completely on flowing,

seemingly choreographed movements. The scene in Hammer Industries Headquarters, which I already analyzed from a comedic point of view, falls completely into the reframing of masculine heroic qualities Purse talks about (82). Black Widow effortlessly knocks out and/or kills one security guard after another and walks out of the corridor without being out of breath, her hair and makeup still in place. Throughout the films, she uses small gadgets to help her, such as electro shockers, pepper spray, Taser disks (small disks that render a person unconscious) and flash bombs (small disk-like objects that deliver a blinding light when activated). Beginning with *The Avengers*, her suit is upgraded to contain bracelets which can discharge a powerful electric current. After *Iron Man 2*, she also uses knives and guns, but she nevertheless mostly relies on her hand-to-hand-combat skills. Additionally, although Black Widow's fighting style develops throughout the films and she is shown to use everything at her disposal, she is mostly portrayed as using her legs. Her movements involve jumps and kicks and she uses her thighs quite often.

Similarly to Black Widow, Gamora also seems to prefer her thighs and legs. She uses her hands more often than Black Widow, though. One reason could be her apparent super power (she is an alien, and although it is never mentioned that her physical strength exceeds that of a typical human, it can be assumed). She also mostly relies on knives and swords. When she uses a rifle to fight a rather large beast in the beginning of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, this is even commented on by Peter Quill, who asks her, "Is that a rifle?" when he sees the weapon in her hand, since "swords were your thing and guns were mine. But I guess we're both doing guns now." It is established only a few minutes later that swords indeed are her domain, when she uses a sword on said beast in order to save Drax and succeeds in slicing through its skin (00:03:18-00:09:25).

Scarlet Witch falls completely out of the equation when it comes to actual physical violence, since her superpower is something called psionic energy manipulation, which manifests as red energy currents she can control and form into energy blasts, bolts and waves. Additionally, she is able to control telekinetic energy, which means she can push or move away a target. Scarlet Witch is also able to levitate and has the ability to not only read but also control minds. Her powers have been depicted to be rather limitless, but since she is able to manipulate her targets from afar, she does not

have a fighting style comparable to Black Widow or Gamora. Her movements are very fluid, but most of the time she is situated on the side of the battlefield, not physically engaging in combat. I would argue, that this type of superheroine is extremely feminine, since, although she has incredibly strong powers, she does not have to use her body in combat and therefore does not challenge any perception of femininity. Her outfit also reflects that there is no need for physical contact and, as a result, no need to protect her body. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, both Maximoff twins wear insufficient clothing for battle, since both Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver only recently broke out of the HYDRA facility where they were experimented on. Quicksilver, although he does not have a specific costume that would define him as a superhero, at least wears sports clothes, an outfit that does not give him a lot of protection, but at least gives him enough room in order to move quickly. Scarlet Witch, on the other hand, wears boots, a short dress, a leather jacket and a long necklace. If applying a real-world potential for danger, this outfit is completely insufficient for combat. She does not even wear long trousers to protect her legs and she could easily get caught on something with her flowy dress and especially long necklace. Her costume in *Captain America: Civil War,* where she is an established member of the Avengers and therefore owns her own costume, is not much better. It is completely out of leather, which at least is a better protection, but part of her costume is a corset. Although Scarlet Witch normally does not have to run or move quickly, a corset seems incredibly out of place on a battleground.

One female character that is not as specifically coded feminine is Valkyrie. The use of comedy is not the only thing that sets her portrayal apart from Black Widow, Scarlet Witch or Gamora. Her fighting style is very physical and there is no real difference between her and other (male) characters. Her movements are short and calculated, but there is no graceful softness to them as there is in the case of Black Widow. She also primarily uses hand-to-hand combat but also wields swords and shoots all kind of weapons. Additionally, an important factor that makes Valkyries physicality different from Black Widow or Scarlet Witch is her believability when it comes to physical strength. Valkyrie is depicted as being incredibly strong, even strong enough to fight Thor or his brother Loki, despite there being a significant difference in height and body mass. Under normal "real-world" circumstances, she would not be able to fight either

of them successfully. Purse (*Action Cinema*, 46) explains the physical "rules" in action films:

> A relationship to real-world physics and physiology, to real-world physical correspondences of weight, momentum, force and the materiality of bodies and objects, is retained. This permits a sensorial recognition on the part of the spectator of physical principles that seem to approximate to our own real-world universe. These correspondences may of course be more strained in some strands of action film than others: beyond the generic conventions of the action hero's pronounced physical resilience and unusual amount of luck, each action film establishes its own rules for its physical universe, a process dependent in part on the particularity of the generic mix.

Furthermore, Purse adds that the action body's limits are usually established early in the film (*Action Cinema*, 46). These limits act as boundaries as to what is possible or impossible and help the audience understand which hurdles are easy or difficult to overcome for the action hero, or which instances are dangerous. I claim that for superhero films, one additional layer of explanation has to be added apart from establishing the fictional world's physics. Since superheroes and heroines usually have a specific set of superpowers, these powers play an important role in their bodies' durability. In the case of Steve Rogers/Captain America, who is the archetype of superheroes in the Marvel universe, it is established that he has an enhanced physiology due to the super soldier serum injected early in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). This enhanced physiology includes enhanced strength, speed, durability, stamina, and reflexes. Since his development into a super soldier was a major plot point of the first Captain America movie and additionally his powers are clearly stated and shown, it comes as no surprise when Captain America easily outruns someone or falls from great heights without breaking anything.

The two most prominent female superheroes in the MCU, Black Widow and Gamora, both do not have an established superpower. In a fictional world, where superheroes and heroines are defined by their powers, this leads to the conclusion that both characters are just very skilled fighters and do not have any special powers (which, after watching their fight scenes, seems highly unlikely). Although the original comic books and the films are two completely different and independent media, I think that comparing the comic book characters to their filmic counterparts makes sense in this case, especially with regard to their powers, since the films are based off the comics and although there are many differences in backstory or outfits, the characters' powers

have not been changed significantly. In the films, Black Widow is incredibly strong, agile, and fast, but other than her training that made her a master spy, an explanation is never given for her physicality. In the comics, however, Black Widow was given a variant of the super soldier serum, the same serum that made Steve Rogers to Captain America, which would explain her strength (Marvel Directory, online directory). Similarly, Gamora does not have any superpowers that are stated clearly to the movie audience. She is, similarly to Black Widow, incredibly powerful (she slices the throat of a gigantic alien monster in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*. and her physical power matches Starlord, who is a half god, half human). It is only mentioned in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*. that Gamora, similar to her sister Nebula, was equipped with some bionic enhancements to make her stronger, but for the most part of the film, it is not mentioned that she has any special abilities. In the comics, however, her heritage is explained in more detail. Since she is an individual of the alien race of the Zehoberei, Gamora has superhuman strength and agility, which is also shown when she effortlessly lifts up Mantis by her neck or lifts a huge cannon, which is even larger than her. Of course, since Gamora is part of an alien race (which is made obvious by giving her green skin), it is not quite possible to compare her to Black Widow, a human. The audience does not apply the same physical rules to Gamora that apply to humans, so not having Gamora's superpowers explicitly stated does not make her as unbelievable as Black Widow (although her alien status of course does). Nevertheless, in a fictional world where there is a focus on superpowers and a clear distinction between being "normal" and "super," the examples I have given at least seem strange. Thus, I would argue that Purse's argument still stands: Women are often depicted on the unrealistic end of what Purse calls the "credibility continuum" (the continuum between naturalistic and highly unrealistic in terms of physics and physiology) (Purse, *Action Cinema* 79). Therefore, it can be said that women in the Marvel Cinematic Universe do not receive the same amount of explanation that men get. Characters such as Gamora, Nebula, or Mantis are rendered unbelievable and unrealistic due to their looks and alien status alone. Black Widow, on the other hand, is depicted as unbelievable due to a lack of explanation of her powers. It can also be argued, of course, that Scarlet Witch is also on the unbelievable end of the spectrum, since her telekinesis and mind-manipulation are more spectacular (and therefore more unrealistic) than an enhanced physique, but it is difficult to argue which attributes are unrealistic and which are more realistic in a film broadly falling into the fantasy genre.

In the end, rendering women's action unbelievable of course also ties in with a postfeminist mindset. As already quoted above, Negra's claim that postfeminism places "female power and desire […] within firm limits," is exactly what happens here. Responding to women's desire to be powerful, these "badass" female characters are shown, but their powers are clearly shown to be nothing more than fantasy. Thus, while seemingly empowering women by the inclusion of these characters, the opposite is true. Attempting to not only maintain typical feminine attributes by having women fight with flowing and gracious motions but also depict their powers as even more unrealistic than male superheroes' powers, again, actively disempowers women.

4.4.   "I'm trying to make it right" - Motivation

Unlike male aggression, female physical aggression needs an outside motivator, or in other words, a narrative explanation for an otherwise unfeminine behavior. Purse (*Return*, 193) claims that in exploitation films of the 1970s and 1980s, a prominent narrative structure was the so-called rape-revenge narrative. Indeed, traumatized and angered women who want to kill their rapist developed into a stereotype. Purse explains that:

> Female anger born of a very personal, gendered suffering became an explanation for female violence and aggression – the implication being that women would not do "this kind of thing" except in response to a devastating and physically invasive assault, a hypothesis that does nothing to dismantle dominant binary conceptions of gendered behaviour (*Return*, 193).

I argue that in the films of the MCU, this narrative structure is still noticeable. None of the female characters were raped, but in many cases, there are personal, even rather similar reasons for their agency, most of them tied to revenge. This is in stark contrast to the male characters of the MCU, who are allowed a greater variety of reasons for their aggression and physical violence. Steve Rogers, the leader of the Avengers Initiative, has rather heroic reasons for becoming Captain America. As a sickly, small young man in the 1940s, he wants to become a soldier, fight for his country, and is even willing to undergo an experimental procedure that makes him into a "super soldier" with superhuman powers. Thor's motivation to fight, especially for Asgard, his home world, stems from his position as the heir to the throne. He is expected to fight,

and for the most part, he does what he is expected to do. Especially with Thor, one can easily notice his pugnacity. He loves enacting violence, fighting, even killing. Tony Stark, or Iron Man, has a slightly different motivation. His motivation is revenge at first, since he was kidnapped by a terrorist group called the Ten Rings. He builds the first Iron Man suit in order to break out of his prison, and now seeks revenge on the terrorist group. However, he soon moves on from revenge and instead embraces his new superhero alter ego.

In this chapter, I will focus specifically on the characters Black Widow, Gamora and Scarlet Witch, and especially on their similarities and parallels in their backstory and motivation. Ultimately, however, I want to contrast the three superheroines' motivation with Valkyrie, whose motivation, as I claim, is less personal and therefore less gendered. In order to analyze the superheroines' motivations, I want to first focus on Coogan's definition of the superhero, since their superhero status is very similar. Coogan especially foregrounds the superhero's altruistic behavior:

> The superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda (31).

In modern superhero films, the superhero's mission is often not as heroic as in early comics, since superheroes are allowed to have inner conflicts and do not always act selflessly. However, even in the case of the MCU and its characters, most characters have the mission to fight against evil and mostly act selflessly, which sets them apart from the films' villains. Most of the MCU's women, however, are situated in a grey area. Almost all of them come from tragic backgrounds full of abuse, their parents are dead, and the heroines follow their own personal missions closely tied to revenge.[22]

In Gamora's case, the tragic back-story has been explored in great detail. When Gamora is introduced for the first time, she works for her adoptive father Thanos who abused her and made her into a weapon, even enhancing her body with technology. She eventually turns against him and works with Peter Quill and the rest of the later named Guardians of the Galaxy. Although her reputation as an assassin is mentioned

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[22] This is especially true for Black Widow, Gamora, and Scarlet Witch. The previous history of minor characters such as Mantis or Agent Carter has not been explored enough in the films.

in a few scenes and she has made many enemies by working for Thanos, she has planned to escape from him for a long time. At the beginning of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1*, her main objective is to escape Thanos' and his henchman Ronan's control and kill them. This leads to the conclusion that Gamora mainly fights for the "good" side in order to save herself.

Black Widow is in a similar grey area of working for the "good" side. Black Widow, born in Russia, was recruited by the KGB and was part of the Red Room, a Soviet program that trains young women to be assassins. She was later recruited by S.H.I.E.L.D., and fights side by side with other superheroes to save the world in *The Avengers*. Nevertheless, she mostly fights for her own reasons: In *The Avengers*, she tries to save her teammate and friend Hawkeye from Loki's grip. When Loki asks her about her motivation, she tells him, "I've got red on my ledger and I'd like to wipe it out." Loki asks, "Can you? Can you wipe out that much red? […] Your ledger is dripping, it's gushing red, and you think saving a man no more virtuous than yourself will change anything?" (*The Avengers* 1:05:20-1:05:53). Indeed, her redemption will span over the rest of *The Avengers* and even over the following movies. Black Widow is in a constant dispute between being a lone wolf who primarily works for herself and trying to be, or at least trying to seem, trustworthy to her fellow teammates. Nevertheless, Black Widow can be most clearly associated with the "good" side, since she actively works for S.H.I.E.L.D.

On the other hand, Scarlet Witch, or Wanda Maximoff, joins the team more out of a need, similar to Gamora. She and her twin brother, Quicksilver/Pietro Maximoff were part of an experiment where they developed superpowers. When the twins were little, their parents were killed by a bomb manufactured by Stark Industries[23], which is why they joined the evil android Ultron, who wants to take over the world (and take down his creator Tony Stark). When Scarlet Witch and her brother realize that they cannot

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[23] Stark Industries is the weapons manufactory founded by Tony Stark's father, Howard, and for at least a decade led by Tony Stark himself and his mentor Obadiah Stane. Stark, who at the beginning of *Iron Man* (2008) is kidnapped by a terrorist group in Afghanistan, soon after his capture decides that his company would stop producing weapons, but later discovers that Obadiah Stane has sold and still sells illegal Stark Industries weapons behind his back. A potentially illegally sold bomb by Stark Industries landed on the Maximoff family's apartment, failing to detonate but nevertheless killing Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver's parents, which led to them seeking revenge.

support Ultron's plans, they are forced to side with the Avengers. Scarlet Witch's motivation soon changes into regret of her actions, when Ultron manages to gain power with her help. When lots of innocent lives are on the line, she is convinced that it is her fault, and is persuaded by Hawkeye to join the team of the Avengers. Her motivation to kill Ultron is cemented by her brother's death later in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Scarlet Witch is defined by her constant feeling of guilt, hence her main motivation deriving from a willingness to make things right again. She is overwhelmed by other people and the public's perception of her and needs male characters – her brother Quicksilver, or Hawkeye – to affirm her desire to fight for what is important to her.

The three superheroines' motivation is clearly closely tied to revenge and suffering, which confirms Purse's claim. All three heroines were captured in their youth and either trained in combat or experimented on. This leads to different reactions. Gamora's narrative is centered on getting revenge on the man who abused her and killed her parents. Scarlet Witch, although she is also motivated by revenge, does not seek to exact revenge on HYDRA, the organization experimenting on her and her brother, but instead Tony Stark, who is indirectly responsible for their parents' deaths. Black Widow, on the other hand, internalizes her revenge. She does not get her revenge on the Russian organization training her, but instead tries to "undo" what she has done.[24]

In addition to their personal motivation, what all three superheroines have in common is the inclusion of a male mentor or father figure who plays a significant role in their motivation. This is not unusual for heroines, since Stuller claims that male mentor figures are common in narratives surrounding female superheroes or action heroes as opposed to mothers or women taking over that role (105). Indeed, none of the three heroines have living mothers (as a matter of fact all of them are orphans), or female mentor figures. Stuller states that,

> While it's wonderful to see depictions of fathers who take an active role in their daughters' lives, when we don't see women teaching women, the message an audience receives is that these virtual Athenas, whether sprung from their fathers' heads or mentored by sage men, can only be as independent as they

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[24] Except for Black Widow's dialogue with Loki in *The Avengers*, it is unclear what exactly she has done.

are because they lack a mother's womanly – almost always implied as passive – influence (107).

Scarlet Witch's mentor figure in *Avengers: Age of Ultron,* but even more so in *Captain America: Civil War,* is Hawkeye. In both *Age of Ultron* and *Civil War*, he is the reason Scarlet Witch does not run away or retreat but instead fights alongside the Avengers. In *Age of Ultron*, When the Avengers try to save the city Ultron has decided to destroy, Scarlet Witch has a nervous breakdown. She is huddled in a corner of an abandoned building, crying and asking herself "How could I've let this happen?" Hawkeye convinces her to go out with him and fight the army of robots Ultron has sent for them (1:45:50-1:47:00). In *Captain America: Civil War*, when Scarlet Witch is locked in the Avengers Headquarters, she is again approached by Hawkeye, who talks her into joining him in order to help Captain America. In both cases, although Scarlet Witch is powerful, she seems unconvinced of her own abilities and worth and therefore needs outside forces, in this case Hawkeye, to guide her.

Black Widow has two mentor figures in the Marvel films: one is Nick Fury, the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the other is Clint Barton, alias Hawkeye, a fellow Avenger. These mentor-mentee relationships are not as obvious, since Black Widow is depicted as being incredibly independent and not reliant on anyone, but Black Widow subtly relies on both Fury and Hawkeye's affirmation for doing what is right. Black Widow, originally a Russian spy, was on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s radar. Hawkeye was sent to eliminate her but decided against it and recommended her to Fury for recruitment at S.H.I.E.L.D. Black Widow is seen using Hawkeye and Fury (as well as Captain America in later films) as her moral compass, insisting on making things right after years of working as an assassin. When Loki talks to Black Widow in *The Avengers* about having "red on [her] ledger", Hawkeye's life is on the line, and with it one of her mentor figures, one of the few people she trusts. Black Widow constantly tries to prove herself, which means her mission in the context of superheroes is to redeem herself. Her seeking of affirmation is especially prevalent when Fury presumably dies in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and Black Widow later finds out that he only faked his death to escape from HYDRA. Black Widow is visibly disappointed and feels betrayed when she realizes that Fury apparently did not trust her enough to let her in on his plan. With Nick Fury not trusting her enough and Hawkeye retiring from the Avengers to live with his family,

perhaps it is no wonder that Black Widow seeks the trust and affirmation of yet another man, namely Bruce Banner, alias the Hulk, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.

Gamora's mentor figure, her adoptive father Thanos, is a contrast to Quicksilver and Nick Fury, since he is significant to Gamora mostly because she seeks revenge against him personally. When Gamora was a child, Thanos killed her whole species and made Gamora watch as he killed her parents. He raised her and Nebula, another child he had kidnapped, as his own daughters, cybernetically changing parts of their bodies as they grew older, with the objective to make both of them into perfect weapons. Gamora's whole mission revolves around Thanos, since the beginning of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* when she tries to retrieve the orb, a powerful object that could help Thanos completely annihilate the planet Xandor. Gamora, unwilling to help Thanos, tries to find and sell the orb to the Collector, the keeper of the largest collections of interstellar species and relics, in order to use the money to escape from Thanos. Her mission to escape from him and eventually kill him is solidified in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, when she talks to Nebula and finds out that her sister's antagonism towards her is a result from Thanos constantly "upgrading" her body and replacing body parts with machinery in order to make her Gamora's equal. Gamora fully realizes what Thanos did to her sister and begs her to stay with the Guardians of the Galaxy:

> Nebula, I was a child like you. I was concerned with staying alive until the next day, every day. And I never considered what Thanos was doing to you. I'm trying to make it right. There are little girls like you across the universe who are in danger. You can stay with us and help them (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* 2:00:47-2:01:48).

Gamora's motivation is therefore tightly linked to the rape-revenge narrative, although she primarily does not seek revenge for herself but for her sister. Nevertheless, her motivation, just like Black Widow and Scarlet Witch's motivation, is deeply personal.

As a contrast to Gamora, Black Widow and Scarlet Witch, I want to briefly touch upon the character Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok*. Valkyrie, such as Thor, is from Asgard and soon after her introduction, the audience, as well as Thor, learn that she was part of an elite group of women warriors, who were defeated by Hela, Thor's elder sister. Her character displays a trope that is usually reserved for male characters, namely that of

the war veteran who realizes that the country she fought for betrayed her.[25] Although her motivation was once to fight for Asgard, after being defeated by Hela, she has no motivation to fight for her country again. Instead she lives on the planet Sakaar, where she is known for being angry and aggressive, displaying various coping mechanisms, such as constantly consuming alcohol. Valkyrie only agrees to help Thor after being made to relive her memories of the final battle against Hela. Although her motivation could also be read as personal – after all, Hela killed all the other warriors in a gruesome battle, letting only Valkyrie live, her motivation is not only linked to revenge. Valkyrie was a warrior before, and there is no reason to believe that her original motivation to be a warrior stems from anything other than the will to fight for her country. Nevertheless, even though Valkyrie may be a well-rounded character who is relatively disruptive in her appearance and behavior, she is only an exception. The MCU's female characters mostly seem to have similar backgrounds and motivations, which are containing their power since they are explaining their behavior without challenging the conception of femininity.

In conclusion, the analysis prompts two questions: Why are female action heroes' motivations primarily personal and why are there no women in the position of the mentor figure? Stuller tries to find an answer to the lack of female mentor figures. She claims that one of the possible reasons for the overrepresentation of men as mentors with women as their students lies in the traditionally authoritative position of men as well as the binary of men as public and women as private figures. The long tradition of housewives, secretaries, etc. has put women in the position of the supporter. Stuller wonders, however, why, despite the changes second-wave feminism has brought with it, this narrative is still so common in films (107). The answer to this question could lie in postfeminism.

Postfeminism places a new focus on traditional values, as for example domesticity. Diane Negra explains that "[p]ostfeminism is marked by an idealization of traditionalist femininities, a habit of criminalizing the female professional, and powerful entrancing visions of perfected female bodies and sumptuous domestic scenes" (152). Additionally, women are solely responsible for a well-functioning family life. The return

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[25]In the MCU, Captain America as well as Iron Man display this character trope to some extent.

to domesticity and to fixed roles for men and women within the family (bread-winner and housewife respectively) could explain why superheroines' missions are still rather personal and private (mostly born out of past abuse or trauma) compared to their male counterparts. After all, as Neroni mentions, action heroines are often forced into situations in order to use violence. If the violence does not occur as a result of self-defense, there are circumstances (rape, abuse) that surround the violent woman and make the violence "more comprehensible within the structure of contemporary ideology, thereby limiting its disruptive power (30 f.)." This means with the return to feminine values, and the resulting difficult position of postfeminism concerning the promotion of female empowerment, the female character can become empowered and at the same time retain her feminine values by having made her motivation something personal and emotional.

As for the lack of mothers or motherly figures, Christina Lucia Stasia offers a possible explanation. She claims that postfeminist action movies with female leads have experienced a shift from fighting male villains to fighting older women. This shift could be exemplary of "the shift in cultural understandings of what oppresses women – not patriarchy, but the women who paved those roads the postfeminist action heroine chases them on (241)." According to Stasia this means that in postfeminist action films, an even bigger threat than male violence is female jealousy.[26] In consequence, one could argue that only with the mother out of the way, the postfeminist action heroine can reach her full potential. Another possible explanation is the return of traditional family values. With women, or mothers being responsible for the well-being of the family, a present mother or motherly figure would not generate enough conflict and motivation for the action heroine. Only with the lack of the heroine's mother and therefore with a destabilization of the family, a driving force and a possible motif (most of the time revenge) is created. In contrast, in a postfeminist society where gender equality has supposedly been already achieved, the male mentor figure, other than the mother, does not pose a threat to the female action hero. According to Stasia the heroine "offers no resistance to white heteropatriarchy because it cannot: postfeminism, particularly the heavily marketed girl power, is complicit with

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[26] This threat of the older woman, powerful and jealous of the patriarchy, exists in the film *Thor: Ragnarok*, with Thor's elder sister Hela trying to gain world domination.

maintaining the institutional structures of patriarchy (247)." Applying Stasia's logic, the mentor figure can therefore be male since he poses no threat to the female hero. More relevantly, however, I claim that the male mentor or father figure is not as deeply associated with family ties. While offering the female hero stability and safety, his stability and safety can never reach that of motherly love. Therefore, even with a father figure in the picture, there is still enough potential for instability or conflict in order for the female hero to have a private and personal motivator which enables her to use violence without losing her femininity.

4.5.   "Sun's getting real low" – Motherhood and motherly qualities

For a short time during the 1980s and early 1990s, there was the notion that men and women were inherently equal, something that reflected in popular culture with the rise of "musculinity" in films such as Terminator (Gill 158, Tasker, *Spectacular* 3). This trend was only short-lived and shortly thereafter, the so-called "action babe" arrived, scantily dressed and curvy, focusing on every possible difference between a man's and a woman's body. Today's action heroine is still just a far cry from the muscle-packed heroines of the 1980s; she is muscular but lean, but the most striking difference is her behavior. This chapter will focus on qualities that arise in the women of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and could be described as "typically female": nurturing and caretaking. I will again put Black Widow in the focus of this chapter, since her character arc has the most interesting developments as well as discrepancies. In this chapter, typical female qualities that arise in the movies will be explored, as well as the depiction of motherhood. Finally, by analyzing scenes from *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the conflicting characterization of Black Widow will be illustrated.

Before the film *Avengers: Age of Ultron* came into theaters in 2015, love and compassion were not exactly attributes one would ascribe to Natasha Romanov, or Black Widow. Prior to the film she was depicted as mostly "bad-ass," a calculating, highly capable, and sexy assassin. She showed in various instances that she had the ability to care for people (especially Nick Fury, Hawkeye and Captain America), but her capacity to love or care for someone was never highlighted before *Age of Ultron*.

This is not typical, since Stuller notes that, "[o]ften with women, love is stressed again and again – making it necessary to wonder about this particular emotion, or ethic, consistently being linked to the source of a female hero's strength. Does love constitute a reimagining of heroism? (88). With Black Widow, indeed her ability for compassion is one of her major sources of strength in *Age of Ultron*, and the typically female quality of her ability is highlighted once again in *Thor: Ragnarok*. I will therefore analyze and compare three scenes that, in my opinion, perfectly highlight sexual differences.

In the beginning of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the Avengers fight against HYDRA soldiers in the vicinity of a HYDRA base in order to take it down. While Iron Man manages to get inside the building, Thor, Captain America, Hawkeye, The Hulk and Black Widow are outside. The team agrees to retreat, since Hawkeye is hurt and they underestimated their attackers and Captain America tells Black Widow to find Banner/ the Hulk[27] since it is "Time for a lullaby." Black Widow looks for the Hulk and finds him, angrily smashing parts of a vehicle to the ground. She addresses him with a quiet "Hey, big guy. Sun's getting real low," indicating to the Hulk that it is time to "sleep" and let Banner regain control. She then slowly walks in the Hulk's direction and stops, raising her left hand and looking slightly anxious when the Hulk comes closer. The Hulk stretches out his arm and she gently touches his hand. The music gets quiet, a piano is playing something resembling a very slow lullaby. She strokes his arm and hand, and suddenly the Hulk stumbles backward and we see Black Widow smiling softly as the Hulk transforms back into Bruce Banner (*Avengers: Age of Ultron* 00:08:03-00:08:50).

When Captain America tells Black Widow that it is "time for a lullaby," it is implied that calming down the Hulk is a task explicitly assigned to her. Taking gender roles aside, it would make more sense for Thor or Captain America to calm down the Hulk, since the two are the physically strongest Avengers and thus it would be less dangerous for

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[27] In order to fully understand this scene, it is important to know that Bruce Banner is a renowned scientist, who primarily focused on gamma radiation. After an experiment went wrong, the usually very quiet and reserved scientist discovers that whenever he is angered, he would turn into a big, green, invincible creature, the Hulk. Since he is not in control anymore when he is the Hulk, he often poses a threat to bystanders – the Hulk lacks the ability to think complex thoughts and is very easily angered. Whenever the Hulk transforms back to Banner, he cannot remember anything.

them to come near the Hulk when he is in rage. Nevertheless, Black Widow is assigned the job, and the Hulk seems to immediately respond to her positively, given the fact that he stops his rampage when she starts talking to him. It is also interesting to see Black Widow's reaction to Hulk's transformation. She seems uncharacteristically warm and caring when she touches the Hulk, not unlike a mother calming down a child.

As a stark contrast, later in the same film there is a scene where the Hulk is under the influence of Scarlet Witch's mind manipulation. The Hulk hallucinates and destroys parts of Johannesburg. This prompts Tony Stark to use the "Hulkbuster," an android similar to the Iron Man suit who matches the Hulk in size and strength, in order to overpower the Hulk. The scene opens with the Hulk growling, running towards the city with a fast cut to Tony Stark's face in the Iron Man suit, who is looking for him. Through the intercom, he tells Black Widow that "I could really use a lullaby," but another fast cut reveals Black Widow sitting on stairs, unresponsive due to Scarlet Witch's mind manipulation. Hawkeye, who is with Black Widow, tells Stark that "that's not gonna happen, not for a while." Tony is on his own and so sends the Hulkbuster after Hulk. Much of the scene is filmed from Hulk's perspective. There is Hulk being shot multiple times and growling, turning over a police car before Iron Man can enact the Veronica protocol, a metal cage, built to contain the Hulk. In contrast to the "lullaby" scene before, the Hulk is not calmed down, instead there is a pounding heard as the camera comes closer to the cage and eventually the Hulk breaks free. When the Hulkbuster comes into the picture, Iron Man's heroic theme can be heard. Iron Man talks to the Hulk, telling him "that little witch is messing with your mind. You're stronger than her. You're smarter than her. You're Bruce Banner." This enrages the Hulk even more and results in an action scene of the two fighting each other, with a series of fast shots, until the Hulk gets buried under a building. In the next shot, the police can be seen flanking the building and the camera slowly zooms in to what is left of the building until the Hulk breaks free from under the rubble. The Hulk, now apparently for the first time, sees what he has done. There is a shot of people running around and screaming between cars as he looks at them, confused and desperate. The sound of a gun angers him again but out of nowhere, Iron Man's fist comes into the picture and punches him unconscious (00:52:45-00:58:59).

Another pair of scenes which establish that calming down the Hulk is uniquely possible for Black Widow can be found in *Thor: Ragnarok*. Stranded on an alien planet, Thor finds the Hulk, who was seen taking off with a quinjet at the end of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Thor needs the Hulk's powers in order to put together a team to fight his evil sister, Hela. He finds the quinjet, hoping to use it to fly back to his home world, Asgard, but the Hulk follows him, taking the vehicle apart. The Hulk comes closer and Thor pleads with him to stop breaking everything when, in the last moment, he pulls up a video message from Black Widow asking the Hulk to turn the jet around and come back. The Hulk, who at this point has been in his Hulk form for a few years, has tears in his eyes, and when the video stops, he growls and punches himself in the face, sad violin music accompanying him as he turns back into Bruce Banner.

The second scene starts with an establishing shot of the city. We then see Bruce Banner, now in clothes, still shocked and disturbed. Thor is next to him, holding his shoulder and arm, telling him "The sun's going down, it's getting real low," in a seemingly endless loop. Banner sits down, his hands covering his ears and pleads Thor to stop saying it, to which Thor replies, "I just need you to stay calm" (1:20:08-1:20:35).

What is interesting about these four scenes is that they establish how the male Avengers are unable to provide the same care for the Hulk and Banner as Black Widow does. While Iron Man in *Age of Ultron* does not even try to use the "lullaby" approach and immediately chooses violence, Thor in *Thor: Ragnarok* tries to calm down the Hulk/Banner, but without having understood the subtleties of the approach – he talks down to Banner and does not understand that the phrase "the sun's going down" has no effect without the right inflection and the accompanying gestures. He is unable to convey calmness, instead almost getting Bruce Banner into another panic attack. By contrast, the sheer presence of Black Widow's voice in the quinjet, without an attempt on the lullaby, causes the Hulk to calm down and transform into Banner (1:14:24-1:15:24). The contrast of Black Widow calming down Banner with his male teammates trying to do the same, allows me to come to the conclusion that the male Avengers lack something Black Widow has in order to care for the Hulk – the right amount of compassion and love. This assumption the film makes is problematic, since as Stuller claims: "The assumption that love is inherent in women, but not in men, is a

sticky, even sexist concept, and the idea that a female superhero's greatest gift is her nurturing temperament or her ability to love selflessly certainly has the potential to reinforce stereotypical feminine ideals" (88).

The MCU goes beyond depicting their female characters as caretakers by defining the concept of womanhood. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, a star-crossed romance develops between Black Widow and Bruce Banner. Since the Avengers are on the run from the android Ultron, and the Hulk destroyed a city, they take shelter at Hawkeye's safe house. Banner and Black Widow share a room, and after they have met Hawkeye's family, his wife and kids, they talk about their inability to be in a relationship:

The scene opens with an establishing shot of the safe house then goes over to Black Widow who is sitting on a patchwork blanket on the bed. She only wears a woolen robe and stares off-screen. She blinks, and we see a flashback of the Red Room—he is being brought to an operating room. In a short cut, we see her on the bed again, blinking, and the scene goes over to the Hulk, growling, before Bruce Banner can be seen, presumably in the bathroom, shaving and staring in the mirror. Banner opens the door to the bathroom and Black Widow stands up. He had not known she had been waiting and she tells him that she would have joined him in the shower but realized it was not the right time. "We missed our window," Banner says, and we see a close-up of Black Widow, whispering: "Did we?" Black Widow and her reactions stay in focus as Banner moves around the room and tells her he has to leave. "You assume that I have to stay?" she asks. She then tells him she had a dream, "the one that seems real at the time, but when you wake up…"— she was an Avenger and not just an assassin. After Banner tells her that she is hard on herself, she comes closer to him, and there is another close-up, this time of her embracing him. "I'm running with it, if running is the plan, as far as you want," she tells Banner, eager to kiss him. He breaks the embrace and the camera follows him until he is on the other side of the room. "Where in the world am I not a threat?" he asks her. He tells her there is no future with him, since he cannot have kids. There is another close-up of Black Widow as she tells him "Neither can I." She bites her lip and, a reaction shot from Banner shows he is confused. Finally, she tells him: "In the Red Room where I was trained, where I was raised, they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. […] Makes everything easier. Even killing. You still think you're the only monster on the team?"

The shots alternate between close-ups of Black Widow, who is increasingly more tearful as she keeps on talking, and Banner, who also starts to cry. The background music is subtle, a very slow piano melody. Banner thinks for a moment then shakes his head. "So, we disappear?" he asks. A reaction shot shows Black Widow smiling softly. (1:05:30-1:08:40)

There are multiple instances of establishing (postfeminist) femininity in this scene. The domesticity of the scene makes it stand out, since none of the Avengers is ever shown to be domestic (Iron Man/Tony Stark, who had domestic moments in his films, has a very futuristic and large mansion, which does not convey notions of domesticity). In this scene, however, neither character wears their usual outfit, the tone of the background is warm pastel colors and wood, and, as a whole, the scene as seems slower-paced. Taken out of context, this scene resembles a romantic movie, not a superhero movie. These traditional values of domesticity play into postfeminist rhetoric. At the end of the day, even Black Widow wants to run away with her boyfriend, leave behind her life as an Avenger and instead live a normal life. This scene is similar to postfeminist romantic comedies. In her article about Postfeminism and popular culture, McRobbie notes the following about the film Bridget Jones:

> With the burden of self-management so apparent, Bridget fantasizes about very traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment. After a flirtatious encounter with her boss (played by Hugh Grant), she imagines herself in a white wedding dress surrounded by bridesmaids, and the audience laughs loudly because they, like Bridget, know that this is not how young women these days are meant to think. Feminism has intervened to constrain these kinds of conventional desires. It is, then, a relief to escape this censorious politics and freely enjoy that which has been disapproved of ("Postfeminism" 37).

This scene, of course, sets a different tone. There is no light-heartedness but instead the audience knows that Black Widow and Banner's love is doomed. Nevertheless, Black Widow wishes for a life with Banner, even though it would mean leaving everything behind and she realizes that it is impossible, that being with Banner is not an option. Banner's "So we disappear?" does not seem completely genuine (and indeed Banner is the one to disappear, leaving Black Widow behind). I would therefore argue that this scene is a perfect example of the postfeminist woman's dichotomy: Her

secret desire of a traditional relationship, the wish to be happy and fulfilled with a husband and children, and the knowledge that she should not wish for that.

When Black Widow tells Banner about her sterilization as part of the Red Room graduation ceremony, she asks him "You still think you're the only monster on the team?" This scene has caused a lot of backlash, especially on blogs or in online magazines. Joss Whedon, the director of *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* even quit twitter due to the myriad of hateful messages (Entertainment Weekly). The main argument of the backlash is that the message the film conveys, namely that the inability to become a mother makes a monster out of a woman, is inherently misogynist (VanDerWerff, online magazine article).

While I agree on this matter, I claim that the storyline of Black Widow yearning to have children and seeing herself as a monster because she is unable to do so is also postfeminist in nature. Gill mentions that the postfeminist definition of femininity is a "bodily property." Although she mentions this in contrast to caring or nurturing as central components of femininity, I argue that it still fits quite well here. In Black Widow's case, her inability to be a mother is a bodily inability. She is incomplete, and although she is not at fault, she feels as though her body betrayed her. This is not the first time that Black Widow's body is shown in a way that focuses on her imperfections: in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, she tells Captain America that she had been shot by the Winter Soldier while on a mission. She reveals a (not particularly ugly) scar on her abdomen. "Bye-bye bikinis," she says, and while this scene is played for laughs (Captain America replies with a: "Yeah, I bet you look terrible in them now"), this scene is still reminiscent of the surveillance of and obsession with women's bodies (00:52:36-00:53:12). As Gill notes, "The body is presented simultaneously as a woman's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling […]." Black Widow's infertility is in stark contrast to Hawkeye's wife who lives in the safe house with her children. She is pregnant at the time they arrive, and Black Widow wants her to name the unborn child Natasha, after her. For Black Widow then, the impossibility of even choosing to live this life, and therefore traditional femininity, leads her to the conclusion that she cannot be a woman but is instead a monster.

We find women as the nurturing, caring characters on more than one occasion in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, the character of Mantis has a similar role as the caretaker, due to her empathic abilities. Although she could use her powers similarly to Scarlet Witch (by inflicting anxiety and panic in others), her powers are primarily used for helping the character Ego with his sleep problems. Gamora also shows her motherly qualities in this film. The character Groot, an alien best described as a sentient tree, died in the first film, but one of his twigs grew into a miniature version of him. The new Groot behaves like a baby or small child, and Gamora is seen taking care of him throughout the film.

Black Widow's character arc in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* shows different containment strategies for her than in the movies before. While in *Iron Man 2* and *The Avengers*, the emphasis was on her body, specifically her sexiness as well as the impossibility of her fight moves, this emphasis on her body has shifted to now focus on her femininity and motherly and nurturing qualities. The focus on her qualities as a mother, or at least a nurturing figure, with her ability to calm down the Hulk (who is portrayed as a giant with the character and intelligence of an angry child) and the talk with Bruce Banner about running away and being a monster leads me to the conclusion that motherhood and nurturing qualities act as another containment strategy. The same is true for Gamora and Mantis in *Guardians of the Galaxy* Vol. 2, but it is more apparent with Black Widow's character. I argue that by focusing on the female characters' motherly qualities, their physicality shifts out of focus.

Black Widow is in a high number of fight scenes in the film, where she also commits violence, but the most important task she has in these scenes is taking care of the Hulk. This means the film concentrates more on her typical female qualities as the caretaker on the battlefield while the men do their jobs. Additionally, her wanting to run away with Banner means that power is taken away from her identity as a superheroine. If she, the most important female character in the MCU, just wants to settle down and quit being an Avenger, it has exactly the result Purse talks about when describing containment strategies: the film distances itself from the possibility of female agency and power (86), since, if not even Black Widow manages to be a powerful, badass super spy, why would an everyday woman be able to be powerful?

4.6.   "I can't control their fear" – Too much female agency

This last chapter of analysis is concerned with too much female agency as a containment strategy. Purse (84) mentions "'too much' female agency, power, or independence" as another strategy to take away power from women: in many films, the power-hungry woman becomes a villain, and female characters who are too powerful are driven mad by their superpowers and as a result turn bad. In the MCU, the first female villain, Thor's older sister Hela, is illustrated as being too powerful. Her power and recklessness are the reasons Thor, Loki and Valkyrie manage to defeat her. There is also a strange dichotomy when it comes to Scarlet Witch and the Vision, the two most powerful members of the Avengers. Scarlet Witch as well as the Vision, who is an artificial intelligence in an android body powered by the Mind Stone, one of the so-called Infinity Stones that will play an important role in future films of the MCU, are able to levitate and emit energy blasts. When Scarlet Witch accidentally kills someone, it is her who needs to be contained and locked away, with the Vision acting as her jail guard. In this chapter I will focus my analysis on Scarlet Witch's character in *Captain America: Civil War* and compare the treatment she receives in the film to that of the Vision's.

Throughout the film *Captain America: Civil War*, Scarlet Witch's power is depicted as more and more of a problem. The scene setting the tone for this is at the beginning of the film, when Captain America and his team (Black Widow, the Falcon and Scarlet Witch) are in Lagos, Nigeria in an attempt to try and stop former HYDRA Agent Crossbones from stealing a biological chemical weapon. The scene starts with Crossbones jumping into the frame and kicking Captain America to the ground, resulting in hand-to-hand combat, including flash-cutting and many reverse angle shots, similar to most other fight scenes in the films. The fight ends with Captain America performing a roundhouse kick so that Crossbones lands several feet away from him. Crossbones kneels on the ground and takes off his helmet as Captain America comes closer and Captain America tries to get him to talk ("Who's your buyer?"), but Crossbones has other plans. An extreme close-up of Crossbone's fist can be seen and he carries some kind of trigger in his hand – a pocket trigger for a bomb vest. He detonates his bomb vest, but after the cut we see a long shot of the scene, with the explosion somehow contained in a red energy ball. A reverse angle

shot reveals Scarlet Witch, who tries to contain the explosion and move it away from the ground. A reaction shot of Captain America already reveals his worry as Scarlet Witch levitates Crossbones in the air, and only then can we see they are right in front of a rather high building. With Crossbones being so high up, Scarlet Witch seems to unable to control her powers anymore and the exploding Crossbones crashes into one of the upper stories of the building. Reaction shots follow of Captain America looking up at the explosion, with people screaming in the background, and of Scarlet Witch, who places her hand on her mouth in desperation. The scene ends with Scarlet Witch, in tears, kneeling on the ground and looking up (00:11:17-00:13:02).

What is interesting is that this scene is similar to other scenes in the MCU, where the Avengers inflict more damage than necessary. When Scarlet Witch looks up at the building, and in the background, civilians can be seen screaming and running away, the viewer is reminded of Hulk in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, after he destroyed parts of a city. In terms of damage, these scenes cannot be compared, since Scarlet Witch did not inflict any more damage by intervening. If she had not intervened, Crossbones would have exploded on the ground and the explosion would have destroyed the ground floor of the building and would have killed bystanders as well as Captain America. Nevertheless, her actions are depicted as irredeemable. When she talks to Captain America in a scene that seems to play a few weeks after the incident, she tells him that it is her fault and Iron Man seems to think so, too, deciding she is a threat and locking her in the Avengers Headquarters, with the Vision as her guard. Scarlet Witch falsely believes this is only for her protection.

The next scene I will analyze introduces a tone shift after a long car chase scene. The Vision is standing in front of an oven, holding several loose pages in one hand. It is very dark – but assuming the scene beforehand was taking place in the late afternoon in Europe, this scene – most probably in the Avengers headquarters, is taking place around noon. From what it looks like, all blinds are drawn to darken the room, and so the Vision's red skin and a fruit bowl full of apples and oranges are the only specks of color. The interior is dark metal and stone, and the color scheme as well as the darkness leave a claustrophobic undertone and remind of a prison. The next shot is a long shot, and we see Scarlet Witch coming into the room. The rest of the room looks less claustrophobic, but it is still very dark inside, since there is no natural light but only

a dimly lit ceiling light. Since many scenes have already taken place inside the Avengers Headquarters, this dim light seems uncharacteristic, as the headquarters have many large windows and glass walls. Scarlet Witch and the Vision talk for a bit and she takes over the cooking. The Vision moves to give her some space and suddenly starts talking about her ("No one dislikes you."). A reaction shot of Scarlet Witch shows her smiling timidly as she thanks him. The focus is on the Vision once again as she explains to her that not being able to dislike her is an involuntary response of the amygdala, but that people just cannot help but be afraid of her. Another reaction shot shows Scarlet Witch stop smiling as she lowers her eyes. In a series of over the shoulder shots she tells him that after having developed her powers, people stopped seeing her as herself and the Vision tells her about not knowing what the stone in his forehead exactly is.[28] Since the Vision stands in front of what either is a window or some kind of light panel, and the over the shoulder shots give the scene a rather intimate feeling, the scene has lost its prison-like feeling and got warmer. When Scarlet Witch, however, tells the Vision that she needs to go to the store to buy spices and will be back in 20 minutes, the tone of the scene shifts again. The Vision glides over to her and cuts her path, asking her to instead order a pizza. Scarlet Witch is calm and asks him if he is not letting her leave. "It's a question of safety", he answers, lowering his head. But not her safety. "Mr. Stark would like to avoid the possibility of another public incident", he tells her, cutting her path off with his hand. (00:52:04-00:54:49).

In the context of the whole film, it is strange that the Vision and Scarlet Witch get treated so differently. Scarlet Witch is powerful, but as I mentioned, she and the Vision have very similar powers. On top of that, the Vision is an android who understands human emotions very well, but not perfectly well. But still, it is him who guards her, and who is being trusted. The Vision tells Scarlet Witch that everyone is afraid of her, but this brings me to wonder why this might be. She is in perfect control of her powers, but still she is the one who needs to be contained. Later in the film she is even broken free, when Hawkeye breaks into the Avengers headquarters and talks her into

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[28] The Vision is an android who came into being in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. He has a yellow stone in his forehead, that enables him to supernatural powers. Since *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), it is known that the stone is actually one of the 'infinity stones', powerful gems that, when combined, enable the user to control time and space.

overpowering the Vision. When she finally accepts that she has to go because Captain America needs her, she manages to easily defeat the Vision throws him several floors through the ground. Ultimately, it is her decision to go, and it seems like she had the power to leave all along. When she pushes the Vision into the floor with her powers, he tells her "If you do this, they will never stop being afraid of you." She replies, "I can't control their fear, only my own", and pushes him down. (1:22:31 – 1:24:59).

An interesting aspect about this type of containment strategy in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is that it clearly is incorporated in the film, but that it is also linked to an emancipation plot. When Purse mentions the containment strategy of too powerful women turning bad, she mentions one of the X-Men: "In *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) the timid Jean Grey is driven mad by telepathic and telekinetic powers that she is unable to control, becoming a divided but monstrous and murderous figure who must be killed off (84)." There are definitely similarities between Scarlet Witch and Jean Grey, since both have similar powers and both are one of the most powerful members of their respective teams. Scarlet Witch, however, although she thinks what she has done is bad and she needs to be punished for it, never really loses control of her powers. In this film, too much female agency is punished with locking her up, but in the end, she decides that fighting for her team is more important than what people think of her. She overcomes her own fear of her powers and realizes that the only person she is in control of is herself.

While Scarlet Witch's narration arc seems empowering, it also reminds of the postfeminist "You go, girl," attitude. At first glance, her power is inspiring, as she, as soon as she believes in what is right (and herself), is able to overpower anyone who wants to hold her back. Nevertheless, this narrative can be damaging. As Gill notes, narratives of empowering oneself by individual choice

> […]resonate powerfully with the emphasis upon empowerment and taking control that can be seen in talk shows, advertising and makeover shows. A grammar of individualism underpins all these notions – such that even experiences of racism, homophobia or domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal as political on its head (153).

What makes Scarlet Witch's narration arc so disempowering and absurd, is that all the time she is framed as being out of control and potentially dangerous. She, just as every

other superhero, is potentially dangerous, but she clearly has total control over her powers. Nevertheless, when she is locked into the Avengers Headquarters with the Vision, she seems to believe him when he tells her that he only wants what is best for her and in the end, she needs another male character, Hawkeye, to tell her what *he* thinks is best for her. Although in Scarlet Witch's narrative it is established that by the end of *Captain America: Civil War*, she finally believes in herself and decides on what is worth fighting for, her unfair treatment is never pointed out. It seems, however, as if she is treated as a threat mostly due to her status as a woman – she is belittled, needs a babysitter and even the Vision, an android, receives more trust than she does. Although Scarlet Witch never 'turns bad', nor is she killed off, her own teammates still try to contain her power, and in the process, treat her unfairly. This shows that although Scarlet Witch has been treated better than similar characters such as Jean Grey in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, there are still tremendous differences in the treatment of powerful men and women.

5. Discussion

In Chapter 4, it was established that the films within the Marvel Cinematic Universe all include various containment strategies in order for their female characters to be disempowered. With the Marvel Cinematic Universe attracting such a large audience, the question remains of how the viewers, especially female viewers, tend to interpret the depictions of active female characters in action films. With the help of three studies on the effect of action heroines on young women, I will try to underline the importance of including strong female characters in contemporary action films and series.

The main role in action films for women has traditionally been the romantic interest, the damsel in distress – a character that can still be found in films nowadays (for example, Mary Jane Watson in the 2002 Spider-Man films, and Gwen Stacey in the 2012 *The Amazing Spider-Man* franchise). Nevertheless, in the late 20th century, a character emerged that can be described as "symbolically transgressive": the female action heroine. After having analyzed modern action heroines in the previous chapters, it is clear that these characters, for all their power and strength, are flawed: they are criticized for being hypersexualized and disempowered in various ways. Still, the female action hero is important, since, if portrayed in the right way, she has the

ability to empower girls and women. Joss Whedon, the writer of both *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, is known for writing what are often called "strong female characters." In a speech he gave in 2006, he talked about why writing strong female characters was so important to him:

> Because equality is not a concept. It's not something we should be striving for. It's a necessity. Equality is like gravity. We need it to stand alone on this earth as men and women. And the misogyny that is in every culture is not a true part of the human condition. It is life out of balance and that imbalance is sucking something out of the soul of every man and woman who is confronted with it (Equality Now, YouTube video).

Nevertheless, he, as well as other writers and creators of the MCU, are regularly called out for their sexism, which has even led to Joss Whedon leaving the MCU altogether. In the next section, I will therefore look into studies about the effects these characters have on young women and try to find reasons for the portrayal of female action film characters as sexualized and disempowered. Furthermore, I will underline the importance of female action heroines and the positive effects they can have. Finally, in order to end this thesis on a more positive note, I will provide the readers with an outlook to future Marvel or superhero films and future female characters. The character of Valkyrie, who I have already mentioned, is rather new and very different from every other female character in the MCU. There are also numerous active women of color in Black Panther, and at least two more female superheroes will join the team until 2019. Maybe future depictions of women will be less about containment and more about empowerment.

5.1.   "Strong" female characters in a postfeminist age

In a 2018 interview, Scarlett Johansson, the actress playing Black Widow in the Marvel films, explained that she has been trying to push for diversity in the Marvel franchise, in particular to see more women, not only as superheroines, but also behind the camera:

> I've been advocating for some more female energy just in the cast and crew as a whole for a better part of a decade. So it's really great to see a more diverse group and certainly great to see that the audiences are embracing and even asking for really strong female super heroines. They're hungry for those stories, and they also want to see a more diverse group that better represents the population. It's wonderful to feel like you've witnessed and been a part of that growth (Fletcher, online magazine article).

Indeed, the newest female additions to the Marvel Cinematic Universe were generally well-received, especially since Marvel included more diverse characters in the cast (Nedd, Pulliam-Moore, online magazine articles). Nevertheless, portrayals of characters such as Black Widow and Gamora have been criticized for sexualization or demeaning back-stories. In this chapter I therefore want to examine the importance of female action heroes. I aim to look into reactions from female viewers of these action heroines, as well as reasons for the relatively homogenous portrayal of female action characters.

This chapter is built on the findings of three studies. Firstly, Jennifer McClearen ("Unbelievable Bodies: Audience Readings of Action Heroines as a Post-Feminist Visual Metaphor") conducted audience readings of different Hollywood action films and interviewed eleven women in their early twenties about their perception of female action heroes. Secondly, in a study published by Heldman et al. under the name "'Hot, Black Leather, Whip': The (De)evolution of Female Protagonists in Action Cinema, 1960-2014," the authors employed a content analysis of different action films featuring action heroines and discussed the likely effects on viewers' attitudes. Finally, Pennell and Behm-Morawitz examined the short-term effects of exposure to sexualized action heroines in "The Empowering (Super)Heroine? The Effects of Sexualized Female Characters in Superhero Films on Women" in a study with 82 female undergraduate students.

Hillary Pennell and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz first and foremost criticize the superheroines' bodies. They claim that "images and messages within these popular films can reinforce as well as create gender stereotypical expectations." Due to the fact that female action heroes are easily outnumbered by male action heroes, the female heroes' characterizations are highly memorable (212). They claim that female action characters are often exploited, since only their sexuality is in focus. Sexualization through their body form and clothing as well as victimization are reminiscent of traditional roles of women (212). Pennell and Behm-Morawitz also mention objectification theory, a theory that postulates "the media encourage women to self-objectify through the emphasis of the sexual objectification of women's bodies in media such as magazines, television, and film, which associate the value of women largely with their appearance" (213). Indeed, after presenting different stimuli (clips

from *Spider-man* and the *X-Men* series) to the participants, it was found that viewing the clips (which showed sexualized female victimized characters as well as sexualized female action heroines) resulted in lower self-esteem, and that viewing female victimized characters had the effect of less egalitarian views on women's societal roles.

McClearen explains that the participants of her study interpret the action heroine as unrealistic and unbelievable. They interpret the action heroines' body shape as incongruous for performing physical feats. A part of the participants generally seems to underestimate the physical capabilities of women, while others claim that action heroines are just poor representations of strong women (834). The body ideal distributed in these action films is criticized as being particularly problematic. The actresses, while exceptionally thin, have to perform acrobatics that can become dubious when performed by such thin, skinny bodies. Some participants claim that the fact these actresses are so skinny plays into the unbelievability of their performances, since they perform feats that should not be possible for them. Additionally, the action heroines' slender bodies seem incapable of fighting against male action characters, who are usually hypermuscular. "Heroes are typically portrayed as larger than life, while heroines are disproportionately small in relation to their male counterparts" (839). On the other hand, participants voiced their enjoyment for these characters despite their problematic beauty standards. Although action heroines are not seen as believable in terms of their physicality, they are believable as resourceful, intelligent and competent characters. "They highlight the mental and emotional traits of heroines, using adjectives such as 'intelligent' 'independent', 'determined', 'driven', 'strategic', 'brave', and 'resilient' to describe many of the characters" (840).

According to Heldman et al., there might be a connection between hypersexualization and believability. A hypersexualized woman's position of power is different from that of a man, since the audience most likely ascribe a "sex object" status onto her. This then means that she receives less empathy and sympathy, and thus might be considered less relatable and believable. Additionally, characters usually gain more social value by performing masculine traits. "In other words, [female action characters] must occupy and maintain an agentic position of power. But the audience's dehumanization of [hypersexualized female action characters] may subsume any

power she once had" (10). Furthermore, hypersexualization leads to self-objectification, which arises when women view sexually-objectifying content. This can be linked to leading to depression, eating disorders, anxiety and general shame about one's body (10f.).

Concluding these studies, superhero and action films do not just simply entertain, but have "real world implications for how we construct our gender-related identities, attitudes, and beliefs" (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 219). Female action characters often resist stereotypical gender conventions, but largely conform to them. The reasons for these portrayals are manifold: McClearen mentions post-feminist sensibilities, such as narrow beauty standards and a natural sexual difference, which are the reason for action hero bodies being perceived as "natural," whereas action heroine bodies are described as "unnatural" or "unbelievable" (839). McClearen therefore calls post-feminist action heroines "visual metaphors." These metaphors help to understand cinematic imagery that joins together seemingly contradictory elements. In this case, the action heroine is the visible metaphor, since post-feminist sensibilities dictate that the image of the powerful action heroine is implausible and therefore must be metaphorically significant, such as for women's success in intellectual areas (842). However, this contrast also reveals the limits of the postfeminist imagination: Although women are able to succeed in realms connected to intellectuality, their bodies are regulated by cultural and gendered norms (843). Helman et al. provide a more positive outlook on women's portrayal. They claim that the rise of the hypersexualized female action heroine (as opposed to other manifestations of the female action character, such as the heroines of the "musculinity" age of the 1980s) is part of the current backlash against women's empowerment. Through direct action, as well as consumerism, and feminism reaching a wider audience due to social media, the social order is challenged. However, social progress does not steadily move in one direction, but instead is a constant battle between spurts of effort and backlash (11). According to this logic, portrayals of female action heroes will change again for more diversity, a change that can already be witnessed in some films (see 5.2).

Although these studies shed a rather disapproving light at the female action hero, she can still act as an empowering agent to women and girls. As McClearen states,

although the female action hero's body is regulated, they still have an empowering effect. One of her study's participants explains an adrenaline rush after having watched the *Hunger Games*, since the action heroine motivated her to fulfill her own goals:

> Even though it's completely unrelated to the action you see in the movies, I relate [these movies] to the fact that I'm graduating and about to get a job. I'm really driven and I want to be successful. I'm not power hungry, but I want a position that allows me to be successful and proud of myself. That's the message I get from a lot of action heroes… when action heroines come out on top, I think that I can come out on top (841).

I therefore claim that action heroines, despite being sexualized and heavily regulated, still have a positive effect. This is not to say that hypersexualization and objectification of female action characters as well as the heavy regulation of their body types and skin colors (conventionally beautiful, thin, toned but not too muscular, and white) should be ignored. Rather I demand that the female action character should be given more screen time and more diversity, since when even the relatively homogenous popular action heroines found in movies today have the potential to empower women and girls, diverse and believable female characters could change the media landscape for the better.

5.2.   Future Wonder Women (and Black Widows)

In his 2011 book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey Brown titled his last chapter "Wondering about Wonder Woman." At this point, although there had been various attempts at producing a Wonder Woman film (in 2006, Warner Brothers released a teaser poster, and Joss Whedon was to write a script), there was no Wonder Woman film in sight (232f.). Brown stresses the importance of Wonder Woman as "a symbol for audiences, young girls and older fans alike, of female strength" (235), hoping that "perhaps the new crop of action heroines who appear over the next few years will prove popular enough to jump-start a Wonder Woman feature film after all" (246). Given that, by 2012 with the release of *The Avengers*, Black Widow gained popularity, and with the release of many film adaptations of young adult novels such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, young women in active roles became widely popular, Brown's wish seems fulfilled. The increasing popularity of action heroines from Katniss Everdeen (The Hunger Games)

to Furiosa (Mad Max: Fury Road) might have helped to finally bring DC's Wonder Woman to life on the silver screen in 2017. Although it had its flaws (e. g. a much too prominent male character who ends up saving the day) it was widely celebrated as the first feminist superhero movie (Coo, online magazine article). I argue that the success of Wonder Woman also paved the way for a myriad of strong, well-written female characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

In late 2017, Tessa Thompson's Valkyrie gave the audience a first taste of what could be possible. Valkyrie, as mentioned in the analysis, is tough, not excessively sexualized and she has been given an interesting role, that of the bitter veteran. This year, in early 2018, with the release of Black Panther, at least three black active female characters had their first appearance: Okoye, the head of a special forces group in the fictional land of Wakanda, Nakia, a spy, and Shuri, Black Panther's younger sister and a scientist as well as the creator of most of the incredible technology in the fictional kingdom. Aside from adding three women of color to the small group of superheroines, these characters are incredibly well-rounded and highly differ from the more traditional superheroines. But well-written supporting characters are not all there is to come. In late 2018, the release of *Ant Man and The Wasp* will mark the first female titular character in an MCU film and in 2018, Captain Marvel will be the first female superhero receiving a solo film.

Marvel as a whole is striving for more diversity in its films and comics. In a comic multiverse with many different parallel universes and often different, conflicting storylines for one and the same character, Marvel is now trying to include some more diverse characters by introducing more women, non-heterosexual, and non-white characters. In the comics, there is now a female Thor, a Muslim-American teen in the role of Ms. Marvel, and Miles Morales, a black Spiderman, taking over the role of Peter Parker. Of course, just like the films, the comic books are not without missteps. In 2013, there was an outcry due to a Spider-Woman cover which shows Spider-Woman in a ridiculous position, crawling on her knees, in order to highlight every curve of her body. Nevertheless, with more diversity both in the comics and on-screen, it seems that the new comics and films are not just aimed at the stereotypical male comic book fan anymore. Additionally, the success of female-led superhero TV-shows, such as *Jessica Jones, Agent Carter, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. and DC's *Supergirl*, lead me to

the conclusion that the depiction of female superheroes is starting to change. In the end, similar to Jeffrey Brown, I wonder and hope, if all these new female characters appearing in comics and on screen in the next few years will pave the way for a solo film for Black Widow, the most prominent female character the Marvel Cinematic Universe has to offer. Ultimately, after being a part of the MCU for eight years, she deserves to be in the spotlight for once.

6. Conclusion and outlook

The aim of this thesis was to illustrate the dominant strategies the Marvel Cinematic Universe uses to disempower its female characters and therefore prove this film franchise is a perfect mirror of our time since it uses prevalent postfeminist rhetoric which regulates women and their bodies by gendered and culturally imposed limits. These limitations can be found in many instances, not only within the objectification and sexualization women in the MCU are exposed to, but also throughout the narrative, which relativizes the female characters' motivation as well as their powers. By analyzing different instances of the film series, I have established at least six strategies used to "contain" women or lessen their power. These strategies range from using comedy as a device to render female physicality unbelievable to laying the focus on sexual differences and the female action heroine's motherly qualities. Nevertheless, even though the films render female characters less disruptive and present them in a way that reinforces their femininity, the films can be empowering for women. Regardless of the sexualization and objectification of the MCU's female characters, as well as the believability of their actions, female viewers are able to experience competent women with distinct agendas who are able to achieve their goals. Throughout writing this thesis I have asked myself the question if the MCU's female characters are problematic or empowering. I would, to conclude, say that they have the potential to be both.

Since the portrayal of postfeminist female characters can be ambivalent, as noted in the analysis, it can (and does) elicit many different responses from viewers. Therefore, it might have been worthwhile to conduct my own study on the audience reception of female violence in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In the end, however, it should not be forgotten that different readings of a text also depend on the opinions the reader

has of the material provided. It is therefore not possible to make a definite statement about the impact the MCU's portrayal of women has. Of course, this also goes for me, the author of this thesis, since I also projected my own mindset onto this film series. However, by carrying out a content analysis, I tried to point out the messages the MCU is sending, since, in my opinion, it is important to acknowledge the power a popular narrative such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe has on enforcing different narratives that can influence our perceptions of different societal standards.

Due to constraints, this analysis is in no way an exhaustive analysis of female representation in these movies and it only scratches the surface when it comes to the different factors that disempower women in action films. Needless to say, there are different topics that require further research. There are still many other factors at play that have not been taken into consideration. Since this analysis mainly focused on containment strategies from a postfeminist point of view, it left out other important factors such as race, class, or other oppressive ideologies. This thesis also hardly touched upon the presentation of different masculinities within the Marvel Cinematic Universe or the fact that masculine bodies are also constantly objectified in the film franchise. Furthermore, I was unable to include information on women's presence in Hollywood at large. The Hollywood film industry is largely controlled and managed by men, who act as cinematic gate keepers and are at least partly responsible for the sexist, stereotypical, and objectifying media representation of women. I only shortly touched upon the different reasons for disempowering female portrayals, so an analysis of further factors for the lack of diverse and multifaceted female characters would also make a possible research topic.[29]

Of course, it is also worth mentioning that although the MCU consists of 19 films and various TV series, it is far from completed. With the arrival of Captain Marvel in 2019, it is therefore possible that the portrayal of female characters will evolve in the next few years. As stated in chapter 5.2, the portrayal of female characters in the MCU has

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[29] Another possible approach to the Marvel Cinematic Universe which is completely different from this thesis would be the portrayal of Africa in contrast to other postcolonialist media. In *Black Panther* (2018), the audience was introduced to Wakanda, a fictional state in Africa, which can be characterized by its immense wealth and technological advancement. Since this portrayal of an African state differs largely from the stereotypical portrayal of Africa as poor and undeveloped, Wakanda would make an interesting topic for analysis.

already developed. As an example, in a scene of the newly released *Avengers: Infinity War*, Scarlet Witch is close to death, lying on the ground, while a child of Thanos, one of the many villains in the film, tells her that she will die alone. It seems bleak for Scarlet Witch, but only seconds before it seems too late, Black Widow emerges and tells the attacker "She is not alone." She and the Wakandian warrior Okoye both rush to Scarlet Witch's help and the three women finally defeat their opponent. This level of female solidarity cannot be found in earlier MCU films (mostly due to the fact that there are hardly enough female characters for them to show solidarity with each other). Due to the increasing number of female characters in the MCU, it is possible we'll see more acts of female solidarity and different types of female characters in the next films, when female superheroines do not have to be token female characters in otherwise all-male teams (such as Gamora and Black Widow), but instead can develop distinctive character traits. Clearly, this means the analysis of female action heroes in the MCU would be worth revisiting in a few years, or with the ultimate completion of the series. Of course, this also means that at this point it is almost impossible to arrive at a definite conclusion about the portrayal of female characters. Since the series has already proven many forms of character development as well as regression, it is impossible to know in which direction the next films will go. With this thesis, however, I at least attempted to analyze the representation of female superheroes in order to demonstrate which dominant strategies are at play in order to maintain power divisions.

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7.3.   Footnotes

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8. Appendix

8.1.   Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit dem Marvel Cinematic Universe, einer auf Comics basierenden Reihe an Superheld*innenfilmen und seinen weiblichen Charakteren. Das Marvel Cinematic Universe ist das erfolgreichste Filmfranchise aller Zeiten und erreicht ein immens großes Publikum. Deshalb obliegt es ihm, Meinungen zu Gender, Sexualität oder Machtverhältnissen zu beeinflussen. Das Ziel dieser Diplomarbeit ist es, aufzuzeigen, wie, wann und weshalb die Superheldinnen des Marvel Cinematic Universe physische Gewalt ausüben und darüber hinaus zu bestätigen, dass im Zuge dieser Darstellungen postfeministische Rhetorik vorzufinden ist. Die zugrunde liegende Theorie dieser Arbeit ist der Postfeminismus, welcher den Feminismus als irrelevant ansieht, da die Geschlechtergleichheit angeblich schon längst erreicht wurde. Postfeministischer Diskurs besteht aus mehreren Merkmalen, wie etwa ein verstärkter Fokus auf den weiblichen Körper, sexuelle Subjektifizierung statt Objektifizierung und die Wiederherstellung von sexuellen Unterschieden. Diese Merkmale werden jedoch alle als bekräftigend angesehen. Darüber hinaus beschäftigt sich diese Diplomarbeit mit sogenannten Eindämmungsstrategien, die im Kontext des Postfeminismus Frauen Macht entziehen. Mithilfe dieser Theorien werden die diversen Heldinnen der Filme analysiert. Um dies durchführen zu können, ist jedes Kapitel einer Eindämmungsstrategie gewidmet. Die Superheldinnen, welche in den Filmen immer wieder Gewalt ausüben, haben einen destabilisierenden Effekt. Dieser wird durch Strategien wie Sexualisierung oder einen Fokus auf die Mutterrolle wieder aufgehoben und eingedämmt, da die Frauen dadurch wieder in eine akzeptierte Rolle gedrängt werden.

8.2.   English abstract

The following thesis analyzes the female characters of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a series of superhero films based on comics. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is the most successful film franchise worldwide and reaches a large audience. This means that it has the power to influence opinions about gender, sexuality, and power structures. The goal of this thesis is to show in which ways, when, and how the Marvel Cinematic Universe's superheroines exercise physical power, as well as to prove that postfeminist rhetoric can be found within these depictions. The underlying theory applied to this thesis is postfeminism, which considers feminism as irrelevant and gender equality as already achieved. Postfeminist discourse is composed of various features such as a focus on the female body, sexual subjectification instead of objectification, and the re-establishment of gender differences. These features are seen as welcome and empowering. Additionally to postfeminism, this thesis addresses containment strategies, which, in a postfeminist context, act to retain women's power. With these theories as a framework, the various superheroines are analyzed. In order to do so, every chapter focuses on a containment strategy. The physically violent superheroines have a disruptive effect, but they are disempowered by strategies such as sexualization or a focus on motherly qualities, and in turn portray these potentially culturally disturbing characters in a more acceptable way.