Superheroes or Group of Heroes?
The Avengers as Multiple Protagonist Superhero Cinema

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Abstract

Heroes have often been thought of as singular individuals standing apart from the rest of the world, and the current superheroes are no exception. Even though their comic book counterparts exist in complex social networks of supporting characters and related colorful heroes, cinematic adaptations often "kowtow" to single-hero worship (Burke 2008, 101), isolating the hero from a larger narrative world and networks of characters. This changed with the success *The Avengers in*. This film and series which it was a part of – The Marvel Cinematic Universe - quickly became a trendsetter within the larger media landscape. In this article, I present a close formal analysis of *The Avengers* and contextualize it within the larger narrative of the cinematic universe. I argue that the film belongs to the genre of multiple protagonist cinema, yet in a form that straddles the line between the two usual variations of that form of cinema. Multiple protagonist cinema is usually either a form often reserved for non-mainstream, experimental narratives in one extreme or it is just a slight variation on pre-existing mainstream Hollywood formulas in the other extreme. *The Avengers* finds middle ground between these extremes, and manages to do so with special consideration to the superhero genre.

Introduction

2012's *The Avengers* was undoubtedly a watershed moment in cinematic history. In the film, six different comic book superheroes, previously appearing in five different films, come together and share the big screen for the first time. In this way, it became a reversal of the until-then dominant trend of putting a single superhero in a single film. The film leaned much further into the sprawling narratives of their native medium of comic books by bringing together a varied selection of characters from different film titles to interact with one another. As the following years made clear, it was an effective strategy for Marvel Studios which allowed their fast-growing series to take a lead at the global box office, and it was seen as a strategy worth imitating by other studios (McSweeney 2018, 6; Vignold 2018). Marvel Studios' efforts in building a cinematic universe have been discussed from an industrial perspective (e.g. Flanagen et al. eds 2016; Johnson 2012) and in terms of it being an unprecedented exemplar of transmedia storytelling (e.g. Richter 2016; Sweeney 2013).

This article adds to these discussions by performing a close analysis of the *Avengers* film in itself. The central purpose is to unveil how the film is constructed to accommodate an audience which has been accustomed to following a clear, single protagonist in films in general (see McKee 2010, 48-9; Snyder 2005, 183; Trottier 1998, 44), and in fantastical cinema more specifically (see Burke 2008; Haastrup 2011). First, this article argues that having multiple protagonists in superhero cinema has not been prominent before 2012, then I describe my methodology for examining *The Avengers*. After this I will analyze my results, which uncover how *the Avengers* is deliberately constructed to emphasize the group over any single hero. This analysis will move from a contextual discussion of actor and character fame into an analysis based on close textual segmentation and examination. Finally, I will discuss how the construction of *The Avengers* represents an innovation insofar as it borrows strategies both classical Hollywood cinema and more alternative multiple protagonist cinema.

The Problems with Protagonists in the Plural

Works of fiction with multiple or group protagonists have often been thought of as an alternative to the more mainstream and classical ways of constructing a story. Both in literature and fiction, they are often associated with working class fiction or social realism (see e.g. Foley 1993; Jørgensen 2015; Klysner 1976; Tröhler 2007). Perhaps its most extreme cinematic exemplification can be found in the Soviet cinema of the silent era where the "protagonists" - such as they were - were an unindividualized group, whereas the antagonists were clearly personified archetypes and members of groups who were opposed to a worker's revolution (Tröhler 2007). All of this would seem to be rather antithetical to superhero cinema, where the extraordinary individual is the focal point.

Heroes in general have often been thought of as singular individuals standing apart from the rest of the world (Carlyle 1993) - and thus not easily reduced to faces in the crowd or mere group players. The current superheroes are no exception. There is no shortage of recent scholarly works comparing them to divine figures (e.g. LoCicero 2007; Morrison 2011; Saunders 2011) or saying that they are "the closest our modern culture has to myths" (Coogan 2006, 124). In the comic books which originated the bulk of them, many heroes have been involved in ever-developing stories for decades, encompassing thousands of pages, hundreds of events and dozens and dozens of characters (see e.g. Alberich et al. 2002; Kaveney 2007, 25). On the big screen however, superheroes were until recently "a lonely breed" (Burke 2008, 100), walled off in their own movies, with only their own immediate supporting cast to sustain them. This is no doubt not just due to the exceptional nature of any given hero which must be given room to breathe within the runtime of a single film, but also due to movie studios asking themselves "Why have ten heroes in one movie, when you can have ten movies with a hero all their own?" (Burke 2008, 101).

However, although they are far from the norm, the more classical Hollywood corpus is not without its share of films with multiple protagonists. These can generally be placed on a spectrum as described by Thompson (1999). On one end are films with several plotlines each with their own protagonist, but where events have little causal impact on one another (Ibid., 47) and on the other end are films in which "a group of people, several of whom are roughly

equal in prominence and who work toward a shared goal" (Thompson 1999, 48). Empirically, it has proven to be possible, if difficult, for audience members to track contradictory goals of characters across a film (Magliano et al. 2005). It is therefore unsurprising that many action films with large casts, and I argue *The Avengers* in particular, are mostly toward the latter end of the scale Thompson presents. Though disagreements between character goals may appear, they are ultimately subsumed under a shared goal by the end of the film. Allowances are made by Thompson for some semblance of hierarchy among characters in these films (Thompson 1999, 248). A logical follow-up question to this might then be how much one character may stand out from the crowd, before they are the undisputed main character, thus rendering the film a poor example of a multiple protagonist film. Israel (2006) for instance mentions that a closer inspection of several films revolving around sports teams usually reveals a single, undisputed protagonist. Similarly, Haastrup (2011, 276-7) concludes that within the fantastical genres of "popular" multiple protagonist films, an "overt hero" usually emerges - her examples focusing on the *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* franchises.

Are we then to expect *The Avengers* in particular, to – as Burke claims is the norm for previous superhero cinema - "kowtow to the prevailing single-hero worship" (Burke 2011, 101)? If not, how is this balancing complicated by the fact that these are pre-existing characters, not only known from other media, but also from previous solo outings on the big screen? At the time, this was largely untested in cinema. The question is in fact so central to the construction of *The Avengers* that it is actually asked within the film itself by the villain, Loki. The alien god of mischief is so convinced of his triumph because he finds it inconceivable that such a superhero team-up would work. One of the Avengers themselves even remarks "We're not a team, we're a time bomb". Perhaps they voice the concerns of audiences (and the producers) as well? In any case, the question of the soundness of this superhero team-up obviously demands an answer by the composition of the film.

Approach and Methodology

In order to determine how *The Avengers* (2012) is composed, I will examine the film closely both in a close textual analysis, as well as

consider its paratextual context. This is because both I and, presumably the filmmakers, recognize that a film is always read through the contextual cues of other films and the audience's previous knowledge of both characters, filmmakers and actors. My aim is not to empirically uncover audience members' experiences of following the many protagonists of this film, though this would certainly be a valuable inquiry. Rather, my argument is that the film is constructed to anticipate a varied audience knowledge of the many characters. Therefore, the filmmakers use several different tried and true heuristics for determining the protagonist of a given film to code all six major characters as the protagonist, to varying degrees, only to then emphasize the group identity as central in the final parts of the film.

My approach and methodology are highly inspired by the formal approaches of film scholars David Bordwell (2007) and Kristin Thompson (1999). From Bordwell I mainly borrow formal cues in determining the protagonist of any given film, which I subsequently operationalize. This operationalizing is then tempered through a framework highly inspired by Thompson. The six heuristic cues inspired by Bordwell are as follows:

(1) *Paratext and context* - Which character is played by the most *famous* actor or actress in the cast.
(2) *Screen time* - "registering how long a character is onstage" (Bordwell 2007, 7.)
(3) *Morality* - Which character possess the *system of values* the audience is assumed to agree the most with.
(4) *Sympathy* - Which character is the most *sympathetic* to the audience.
(5) *Change* - Which character is the most *affected or changed* by the story's events.
(6) *Power* - Which characters is the most *powerful* within the story.

The first cue necessitates a placing of the film in its context, as I will do in the next section. In addition to discussing actor fame and celebrity, as Bordwell suggests, I will also discuss the fame of characters. The subsequent five cues are discussed through a close reading of the film. I operationalize these in terms of a segmentation of the film – a division of the film into parts for analysis (Bordwell and

Thompson 2013, 504). This is done to recover "the architecture of the movie" (69). I have performed a segmentation of the film in which the scene is the smallest unit. I define a scene as any single unit of narration without significant shifts in time or space facilitated by editing. While the actual screen time of characters found as a result of this is an approximation based on segment lengths, and thus does not account for characters leaving or entering scenes, the number of scenes each character appears in is an exact measure. A more granular approach (for instance down to a shot-by-shot basis) might have had the advantage of revealing a greater degree of detail and nuance of the architecture of the film, and how its narration priorities certain characters and emotional states. However, I argue that the approach I have here still has the advantage of quantifiable units of measurements that can then be combined with more qualitative readings of the film's text.

This quantification of the film is advantageous for answering the question of screen time in raw numbers. Of course, not all screen time is created equal: The order of the events presented will always be of paramount importance, and I will discuss this more in depth with reference to Thompsons (1999) work on Hollywood cinema. This leads me on to discuss the four next cues, tempering them through reference to the segmentation. Especially the two last cues - those of *change* and *power* will be given special consideration, as they entail a consideration of both the serial nature of the film, and the emphasis on power(s) in the superhero genre.

I stress that the combination of qualitative reading and quantification of narrative segments and their (character) contents is necessary for a true negotiation of the heuristics. As Bordwell (2007) points out, it is not given that all six of the heuristics will give the same answer, and careful consideration must then be given to comparing and contrasting their relative importance. This is what allows me to uncover the narrative strategies within the composition of *The Avengers* which each contribute to no single "overt hero" emerging.

Actor and Character Fame

As mentioned, Bordwell (2006, 8) argues that a common rule of thumb for figuring out the main character of a film is identifying the most famous actor in the cast. The strategy utilized to counter this in *the Avengers* and the Marvel Studios opus at large is - success-

fully or not - to emphasize the primacy of characters over actors. This is most thoroughly examined by Koh (2014) who terms it as a practice of "celeactor labour" in which the actors are subsuming their own identities under those of the characters in question. In this view, it is "the celeactor, not the human actor portraying it, who is of paramount importance to the franchise." (Koh 2014, 495).

The casting of the initially "lesser-known stars as leads" (Koh 2014, 485) in the films is thus a "canny strategy by Marvel Studios to manage paratextual star narratives and trajectories, the verisimilitude of the onscreen fantasy, and the studio's present and future bargaining leverage" (Koh 2014, 485).

How successful this business strategy has been at large in the long term is debatable. Evidence seems to support that a hierarchy of actors still exists within Marvel Studios, most notably in their allegedly preferential treatment of Robert Downey Jr., who plays the Iron Man (e.g. Breznican 2011; Donnelly 2012; Vieira 2013). However, the strategy is in line with recent research suggesting that the expected profit of a movie featuring a movie star may not be higher than the expected profit of a film without any stars (Albert 1999; De Vany & Walls 2004; Skilton 2009).

Even if we accept the primacy of character over actor however, this just seems to push the problem of picking a protagonist one step further down the line. Will an audience member not just pick the most famous character then, and decide that they are the protagonist? This is certainly a possibility, and leaves a job cut out for the screenwriter and director if they are to emphasize the group over the individual. Character-based franchises as such are nothing new in cinema (e.g. Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Scott 2009), and *The Avengers* has certainly been discussed as "a cinematic display for Marvel's most valuable character *assets*" (Stork 2014, 78 emphasis in original).

While fictional characters with lives across many different media and settings may attain the status of pop cultural icons or "popular heroes" (cf. Bennett and Woollacott 1987) which general audiences may have a familiarity with through indirect pop cultural awareness, this should not be taken for granted. For instance, a radical reimagining of a character superhero comics is usually reserved for the most popular characters, in which case the unexpected and unfamiliar can be seen as ironic or subversive, as well as comprehen-

sible to a broad audience (see e.g. Bagger 2019). And the six Avengers were certainly not the most popular characters prior to their big screen debuts.

The Avengers can be viewed as a direct sequel to five previous films, *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America The First Avenger* (2011). The four title characters from these five films, as well as Natasha Romanoff aka "Black Widow" (who had a supporting role in *Iron Man 2*) and Clint Barton aka "Hawkeye" (Who had a minor appearance in *Thor*) are the six protagonists of this outing. However, these films had wildly differing audience attendance (see **Figure 1**) and thus general audience familiarity could not be assumed.
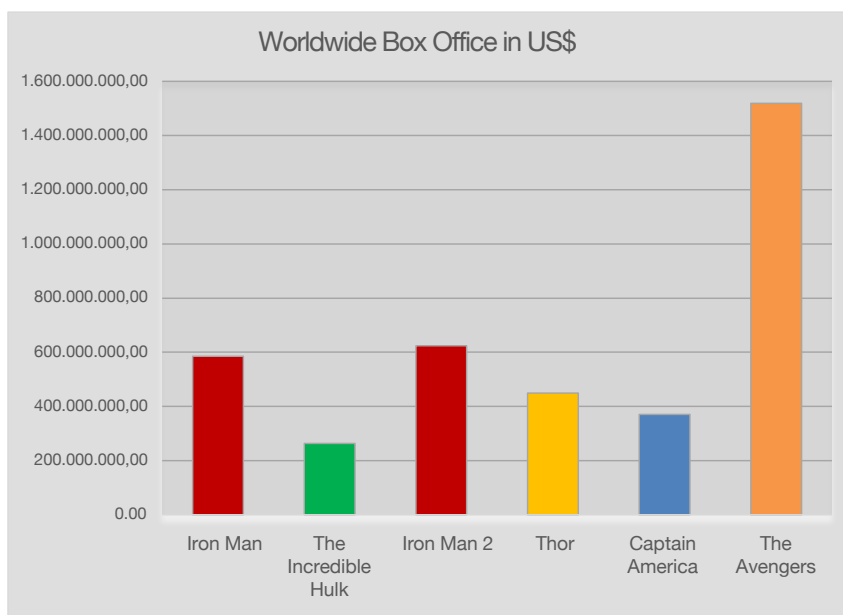

Figure 1 –
Worldwide Box Office in US$ of the first six Marvel Studios films.

Furthermore, neither of the six main characters in the film were exactly the comic book superheroes on most people's minds before their big screen debuts. The Hulk was arguably the most widely known before his MCU debut, not just due to a tangentially related film outing half a decade earlier (2003), but also due to a relatively popular TV series (1978-1982). Iron Man was also considered a "second string" superhero (McSweeney 2018, 42), and had only

a mildly successful cartoon to his name in recent memory. While Thor, the Norse god of thunder was certainly a well-known mythological figure (Arnold 2011), his Marvel incarnation was no household name. And finally, Captain America might be regarded as an example of a "nationalist superhero" (Dittmer 2013), who might not hold much global appeal. Thus, though the film is a display of Marvels character assets, it must be mentioned that these were certainly not their most well-known characters. Most of Marvels most famous characters (e.g. Spider-Man and the X-Men) were licensed off to other studios at the time (Stork 2014).

The sparse existing research on reception of multiple protagonist cinema suggests that audience member will generally try to seek out a single character with whom to identify or follow along, often based on their preconceived notions of actors or directors (Azcona 2005). While any member of the audience of *The Avengers* may be familiar with any of the pre-existing characters in the film, it remained an open question which of them it would be, and how far this familiarity would extend. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the film's writer and director of the film Joss Whedon, is familiar with multiple protagonist productions with pre-existing characters with whom the audience were likely not familiar. He had worked with a similar scenario when adapting his own cancelled and never fully aired television series *Firefly* (2002) into the film *Serenity* (2005) (Pascale 2014, 338). In the following, I will take a closer look at the case of *The Avengers* itself to see how it was composed to anticipate this.

Screen time, Morality and Sympathy

Next, I turn to the textual cues inspired by Bordwell. Given my segmentation of the film the most obvious cue to try and ascertain here is of course *screen time*, but as we shall see, this proves problematic without also considering other factors such as a character's morality and sympathy. Below I present a table which outlines an estimate of how much time each character spends "onstage "- both in raw time, and as a proportion of the films running time.

At first glance, Iron Man emerges as a rather clear lead in the film. He has the most time on screen, his character's previous films had drawn the most box office, he is played by arguably the most well-known actor, an actor apparently able to have some leverage over the composition and content of the film (Breznican 2011; Donnelly

Character	First Scene	Scenes	%Scenes	Screen time (Est.)	Screen time%
Hawkeye	00:03:41	37	23,1%	28:00	21%
Black Widow	00:12:05	35	21,9%	51:00	38,3%
The Hulk	00:15:41	30	18,7%	38:39	29,02%
Captain America	00:20:40	40	25%	55:49	41,91%
Iron Man	00:23:12	40	25%	57:28	43,15%
Thor	00:43:48	30	18,7%	39:42	29,8%

Table 1 – The six Avengers characters broken down by time of first onscreen appearance, an estimated number of appearances in both scenes and screen time.

2012). However, Iron Man, while certainly prominent, barely edges out Captain America for screen time. In fact, another survey of character screen time for the news medium Vulture - using a different methodology - has the Captain edging out Iron Man for screen time, but is otherwise in agreement with my survey about the order of screen time for the characters (Cruz 2012).

The Captain is arguably the character possessing the system of values with which the audience is expected to agree the most. Interestingly, Captain America is a potential shoe-in for a point-of-view character as he is a fish out of temporal water, and thus largely unfamiliar with the film's universe. Thus, he might have become an efficient audience proxy and thus the de facto protagonist. This potential goes mostly untapped, as the narration of the film never explicitly emphasizes the Captains reaction to the other characters or events. Thus, while he may be the moral center of the story, Captain America is far from an audience proxy, and is arguably the least personally affected by its events (cf. the cue of *change*).

A character that is arguably slightly more of an audience proxy, as much as a trained secret agent can be, is Black Widow. Her early entrance into the plot introduces her before some of the more well-known superheroes. Most of the long talkative scenes of the film involve Black Widow in some way, including her introductory scene (03:30), her (and the audience's) introduction to Banner (03:19) and her interrogation of Loki (02:31). All these scenes allow for a great deal of reflection of her character. These scenes strike a bal-

ance between framing Black Widow as in danger while at the same time revealing her to be deceptive and ultimately in control of the situation, only feigning her fear. This is subverted in a fourth case - when she is chased down by an enraged Hulk. This scene borrows many cues from horror cinema and emphasizes her terrified reaction. She thus gains in terms of audience sympathy - a popular heuristic for picking a protagonist - but her status as a morally dubious and deceptive assassin is a counterbalance to this.

Black Widow's personal involvement in the story is motivated by her relation to Hawkeye, who is the mind-controlled thrall of Loki throughout roughly three fourths of the film. While an argument can be made that he is thus the character most immediately affected by the events of the story, as he is the most obvious victim of Loki's actions, Hawkeye is without question the least prominent of the six main characters.

Thus, the general narration of the film is not composed to prioritize any single character. This point will become clearer in the following section where I discuss the characters in terms of their respective arcs (i.e. a heuristic of how much they are affected or changed by the story), and how their respective relations and personal involvements factor into the overall plot of the film.

Character Arcs

The discussion of cinematic character arcs - or how characters are *changed* by the events of a given film - usually revolves around a single main character (e.g. McKee 2010, 48-9; Snyder 2005, 183; Trottier 1998, 44) while only rarely several characters have distinct arcs (e.g. Gerke 2010, 79). American cinema in particular has a number of notable examples of protagonists striking a balance between sharing an overall goal, and having distinct character arcs (cf. Ray 1996, 190-1; Wood 1981, 90; see also Thompson 1999). The more a character is clearly affected and changed by the story, the more likely they are to be seen as the protagonist, according the heuristic of *change*.

The major characters in *The Avengers* do have individual arcs - but I argue that these arcs are in fact truncated repetitions of their previous films' appearances. This truncation is already a tendency in alternative cinema featuring a multitude of characters (Smith 1999). Each of the four superheroes that have previously headlined their own film go through a familiar development. Iron Man goes

from hostile and arrogant to ultimately selfless and self-sacrificing, as he did in both his previous films. Bruce Banner goes from rejecting his Hulk persona to ultimately embracing it to combat a greater threat in the heart of New York, as in *The Incredible Hulk*. Thor once again has to come to terms with his adoptive brother's villainous impulses and take up arms against him. Similarly, while Captain America goes through little in terms of internal change, the exterior elements of this storyline - being restricted and kept in the dark by his military superiors, only to ultimately desert from them and act according to his convictions - carries strong echoes from his previous outing in *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

In terms of character involvement in the central conflict, Iron Man – who otherwise leads in screen time and actor recognition - is not personally involved until the transition into the climax of the film. The character with the most personally at stake in the conflict of the film is arguably Thor, who is pitted against his adoptive brother Loki. The plot is thus a direct continuation of Thor's own debut film. However, the prominence of Thor's emotional development is mitigated by his late appearance, which also feeds into the heuristic cue of *power*, which I shall treat more thoroughly later on.

If no character develops beyond their psychological status at the end of their previous film outing, then it is hard to pick an undisputed central protagonist of the film. This does not exclude larger multi-instalment character arcs from happening as in serial television (see Porter et al 2002; Newman 2006, 23), but it also makes the film in question relatively self-contained. All the characters ultimately had to be thought of as interesting enough to view not only in the context of this story, but also in potential future sequels where they would once again break out on their own, and not be surrounded by their newly-formed group.

Compartmentalization

The superhero archetype is often considered part of a structural system including helpers, love interests and villains who in turn structurally constitute the hero (Burke 2008, 14). *The Avengers* departs radically from this as the group identity of the Avengers team is the focus at the expense of heroes interacting with their pre-existing networks. As expressed by writer-director Whedon: "You need to separate the characters from their support systems in order to

create the isolation you need for a team." (quoted in Donnelly 2012, para 2). Only Iron Man gets to interact with his love interest, while Thor has to be satisfied with a photo. Captain America's is relegated to a deleted scene (Schaefer 2012), while Banner's love interest has all but "been abandoned" (Beaty 2016, 323).

This becomes even more explicit in the tables below showing how many segments (out of a possible 160) the respective heroes spend with the minor characters in the film, many of whom they have previously interacted with, as opposed to how often they share the screen with the other heroes or are without major or minor characters around them:

Table 2 – Number of character co-appearances in *The Avengers.* An * marks if the two characters interacted in a previous film.

	Iron Man	Captain America	Banner	Thor	Black Widow	Hawkeye
Fury	7*	9*	6	6	12*	6
Hill	3	4	2	2	3	10
Coulson	2*	5	5	3*	3*	4
Loki	7	4	7	6*	11	9
Pepper	1*	0	0	0	0*	0
Selvig	3	1	1	1*	3	2

Table 3 – How many times two given Avengers co-appear within *The Avengers.*

	Iron Man	Captain America	Banner	Thor	Black Widow	Hawkeye
Iron Man	-	27	14	18	17	9
CptAmr	27	-	16	18	23	12
Banner	14	16	-	16	18	5
Thor	18	18	16	-	16	7
B.Widow	17	23	18	16	-	14
Hawkeye	9	12	5	7	14	-

Not only are the characters' preexisting relationships to both the on- and off-screen supporting cast usually paid the barest of lip-service, the main characters within the film who have previously shared the screen barely interact. Hawkeye and Thor get exactly

one exchange of dialogue, while Iron Man's conversations with Black Widow across all their 17 co-appearances consist entirely of him giving her a snide greeting, which she never responds to. The emphasis is clearly on the new dynamics of previously unconnected characters, or the group as a whole. This is even more evident when one considers the over-all composition of the film into the usual four large-scale segments proposed by Thompson (1999) and takes a closer look at the patterns in which the characters appear in these segments.

Table 4 – A segmentation of the film into four large parts, inspired by Thompson (1999) and a distribution of how many scenes contain what number of Avengers across the given large-scale segments.

Avengers in scene :	Setup (00:27-31:39)	Complicating Action (31:40-01:03:28)	Development (01:03:29-01:38:20)	Climax (01:38:21-02:12:21)
One	16	8	14	17
Two	1	0	19	7
Three	0	5	2	1
Four	0	2	0	1
Five	0	1	5	1
Six	0	0	0	4

As is evident from the table - the first fourth of the film mostly shows the six protagonists in scenes by themselves. In the Complicating Action, the protagonists are still occasionally walled off from each other, but they are just as likely to appear in groups of three or four, slowly gathering and getting to know one another - even though interpersonal tensions are obvious. This comes to a head in the one scene in the Complicating Action in which five of the six protagonists are together, bickering and distrustful of one another. This scene coincides with a sneak attack by Loki and an enthralled Hawkeye, which sends the Avengers shuffling into action, and into the part of the film known as The Development. Here two-on-two segments are more common, either in the form of cooperation (Captain America and Iron Man fixing a failing jet turbine) or confrontation (an unruly Hulk chasing down Black Widow or brawling with Thor). It is not until the Climax of the film - the extended battle for New York, that all six members of the hero group share the stage for the first time. Thus, the film is structurally composed

to emphasize the unity of the six Avengers as common arc. This becomes even more evident when discussing the final heuristic, that of power.

With Great Power Comes Great Teamwork

The aspect of power is perhaps worth giving extra consideration in a superhero action film. Power in general and superhuman skills in particular are no doubt central to the appeal of the superhero. In an uncharitable framing, this is due the genre appealing to "a prepubescent teenage boy, who feels weak in the world and insufficient to the demands of the day" (Faludi 2007, 51). More charitably, it is merely in the allegedly universal pleasure of seeing creative use of unusual skills unfold in action characters (e.g. Langkjær and Jensen 2019). In a purely compositional perspective, it is very interesting to consider that the six Avengers are ultimately presented in an ascending order of "might", as previously discussed. The relative power scale is even made explicit through a series of inter-team skirmishes throughout the film. The more super powered a character is, the later that character appears in the film. The anomaly here is Bruce Banner. In his civilian guise he has no superhuman powers, while his Hulk persona is perhaps an unmatched force. The Hulk persona however, does not appear until the Development portion of the film. Additionally, while the Hulk is arguably the most powerful character within the film, besting both of the alien gods Thor and Loki in unarmed combat, he is also regarded with suspicion and unease by a number of the other main characters. The degree to which Banner can control his Hulk persona is withheld by the narration until the Climax portion of the film, and the character is therefore more mysterious than identifiable to the audience.

However, the use of power and superpower within the film is even more complex than this. Langkjær and Jensen (2019) attest that within the study of characters in action films, emphasis has - perhaps paradoxically - usually not been on the main characters *people who can skillfully perform actions*. Here again, *The Avengers* is composed to emphasize both individual displays of impressive skill and, importantly, even more fantastical displays of skill in the teamwork of the Avengers members. This is clearly evident in the final fourth of the film, what Thompson calls the Climax (1999). Here scenes from the film regularly alternate between showing the

superheroes performing individual feats of strength of agility, and showing them almost effortlessly combining their skills for even more devastating attacks against the alien army. Iron Man doesn't just take down an alien by a self-directed Jonah-and-the-Whale maneuver, he also bounces his lasers off Captain Americas shield. Hulk doesn't just single-handedly flatten the manipulative Loki mid-monologue, he also jams a large piece of metal shrapnel into the back of an alien leviathan, which Thor then electrocutes without looking twice.

The climactic section of the film also demonstrates an interesting reversal of a central tenet of the earliest multiple protagonist cinema: Instead of individually characterized villains and the protagonists who are an indistinct group as in early Soviet cinema (cf. Tröhler 2007), we have the reverse. While our heroes are clearly defined, the aliens they fight against are animalistic, monstrous and an indistinct horde. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than the fact that the destruction of the alien mothership also kills all the individual aliens. The aliens have no individual existence outside the hive – whereas the Avengers exist both as distinct individuals and as group members.

This final fourth also contains some of the only stylistic ornamentations of the film, and these coincide with the presence of all the main characters onscreen at once. Firstly, this occurs when the team is finally united in opposition to the alien force, which is underlined by a circular camera movement around the battle-ready superheroes. This has been described as a celebration of a "moment of superhero synergy" (Stork 2014, 78). The circular camera movement here captures an elated and triumphant feeling, not unlike how similar camera movements are used for moments of lovers uniting in romantic cinema (cf. Højbjerg 2014). But, as I have established - romance takes quite a backseat to teambuilding in this film.

Perhaps more notably, these moments of flourish include a digitally composed *long take* lasting more than a minute, in which the camera travels through the streets of New York in a relay race between the six Avengers, who are effortlessly aiding one another. The stylistic flourishes have been compared to a filmed version of the comic book "splash page" (Willems 2019), which is an attention-grabbing way to compose a page in a comic. In the same way, these flourishes are particularly attention-grabbing in the composition of

this film, and emphasize the unity of the team. Even the action and camerawork of the film seems to leave little doubt behind: The six main characters in unison are clearly framed as more than the sum of their parts.

Discussion

If superheroes are usually thought of as singular, superhuman or divine figures - as previously discussed - then what does this type of unification on the big screen signify? Perhaps one of the most concise observations has been put forward by Acu (2016), who discusses how the Marvel films have reframed the heroic "from the ability to do anything to the ability to meaningfully contribute through one's affiliations "(ibid., 195). I agree with this, and posit that this true in two significant ways: First it is true in the sense of fictional characters and heroes gaining value through *who* they know, and secondly, it is true in the sense of what these heroes can *perform and accomplish together*.

The first point represents an emphasis on what might loosely be termed a form of "network power" (cf. Castells 2011). Here the character become particularly interesting because they might at any point interact with a myriad of other characters in the same fictional universe. This has obvious advantages in terms of delivering "fan service" for an audience with knowledge of the source material (see Beaty 2016), but since die-hard fans will only ever be "a fraction" (Burke 2012, 96) of eventual audiences, this might be more broadly construed as a showcasing and demonstration of "character assets" (cf. Stork 2014) which can then validate one another by their mutual connection.

The second point represents one step further from being impressed at a single hero's skilled use of their human or superhuman abilities (cf. Langkjær & Jensen 2019). Now, these heroes can perform even more impressive synergistic acts with one another. These characters are fundamentally appealing in part because of their superhuman capabilities, and their interactions are meant to reflect new and exciting ways of showcasing these.

In this way, *The Avengers* is not only a lynchpin of the Marvel Cinematic Universe - but also represents a sort of "middle ground" between the classical narrative strategies of Hollywood cinema and more emergent, alternative approaches. In the former, a goal-orient-

ed protagonist goes through a series of events with a clear logical causality. In the more alternative approach often exemplified by multiple protagonist cinema - the interactions between equally prominent characters is the appeal and focus in and of itself (Israel 2010). Here, in order to create a transmedial and transtextual shared universe, borrowing from both approaches is needed in the specific construction of this film. Thus, while the Marvel Cinematic Universe exists narratively as something "more complex and intertwined" than episodic television (Proctor 2014, 6) and as something "unprecedented in American Cinema" (Sweeney 2013, 146), I have argued that its success can also be understood through media-specific modes of analysis.

Conclusion

The central claim of this article is that a media-specific analysis of *The Avengers* (2012) reveals a strategic narrative construction which emphasizes a group of six heroes over any single "overt hero". This is determined by both a number textual and contextual heuristics. Textually, it is evident that many of the cues utilized to determine the clear protagonist of any given film are set to work against each other: The most *sympathetically* presented character (Black Widow) is arguably the most morally dubious and also the least powerful. The character with the *value system* that can reasonably be assumed to be the one the audience is expected to identify as "correct" (Captain America) is relatively de-centered, and has perhaps the least explicit character arc - being the least affected by the story's events, and the least personally involved. The most *personally involved* (Thor) is the last to appear, having proportionally less screen time and is the one *most personally affected* by the events (Hawkeye) is arguably the least prominent. The issue of *power* is alleviated by how far along in the runtime the characters first appear. The more powerful they are, the later they are introduced. Finally, the climax of the film is composed in both form and content to show that, no matter what their individual power may be, their group identity ultimately supersedes it.

With the added considerations of "celeactor labour" (Koh 2014) which ostensibly subsumes actor identity under character identity, the aim is clearly to create character-based franchises (Scott 2009) not unlike those of the comics. A venture like *The Avengers* film thus

indeed becomes a display window for "character assets" (cf. Stork 2014) in ways which appear carefully constructed. That these characters attain a synergistic power in their big screen co-debut is therefore a strategic choice in both a narrative and business sense. Both characters and actor were relatively unknown before their big screen debuts. While much of this is comprehensible through a lens of transmedia studies, I have here argued for a methodological approach of very close textual analysis informed by media-specific heuristics and observations. This is the central methodological and empirical contribution of this article.

To return the question posed earlier in this article: Why bother having six superheroes in one movie, when you could give each of them their own film instead? In short, with the right construction, the result will be a film that is both comprehensible on its own, and presents the characters in such a way that audience engagement can be had with most of them – both individually and in unison. This approach then ostensibly allows the characters to disseminate from this particular film and into many other channels.

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