

The Avengers Initiative: Joss Whedon Updates the Action Movie

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Introduction

[1] The 21st century saw the superhero action blockbuster inherit the action movie genre from the likes of the *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, and *Mission Impossible* series of the '80s and '90s. Based on comic book source material from the last half-century or so, films such as *X-Men* (2000), *Spider-Man* (2002), and *Batman Begins* (2005) all spawned successful film series that created an unprecedented interest in both comics, and greatly expanded the traditional action movie audience. In the wake of these initial successes, Marvel Studios began what is now called "Phase One" of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In rapid succession they released *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), all culminating in the monster budgeted, super crossover *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012).

[2] In a move perceived by many to be somewhat out of left field, Joss Whedon, of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fame, was selected to write and direct *The Avengers*. Although Whedon previously forayed into the Sci-Fi/Action genres with some uncredited script doctoring on action movie staple *Speed* (1994), and his cult favorite TV creation *Firefly* (2002), and its sequel feature film *Serenity* (2005), it was not his specialty. He was better known for his work with quirky groups of teenagers and various supernatural creatures saving the world. His works are also known for their less-than-traditional depictions of masculinity and femininity, including physical female heroes and domestic men, as well as their focus on group relationships.

[3] Whedon's finished product adheres in its narrative structure and plotting to the traditional action movie, and maintains the genre's conventional tropes and images, but undermines the genre's established gender roles and masculine ideals, as he does with nearly all of his works. My analysis of this film is designed to assess Whedon's and *The Avengers*' representations of gender, and its effects on the structure of the teamwork and violence within the broader context of the existing action movie genre. Furthermore, how Whedon does this while following the 'rules' of the action movie, and satisfying the genre's pre-existing audiences. I will view *The Avengers* through the lens of action movie scholarship such as Mark Gallagher's *Action Figures: Men, Action Films, and Contemporary Adventure Narratives*, and Lisa Purse's *Contemporary Action Cinema*, while examining Whedon's purposeful adherences to and disruptions of the genre. My primary focuses will include the Black Widow as a depiction of femininity, the varying representations of masculinity from the traditional Steve Rogers to the majestic and alien Thor, the uncharacteristic de-emphasis on action violence, and the implications of the unlikely superhero team up. Through this framework, I will argue that Marvel Studios and Joss Whedon aim to reshape the action genre and its audiences.

Structural Norms

[4] In his book *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, José Arroyo describes the narrative structure of the action movie as "Equilibrium, disruption, a quest for resolution against deadline interspersed with set pieces, the restoration of equilibrium and the impression of closure" (Arroyo viii). Arroyo calls these the "shared

expectations” of the action genre. They are the accepted conventions that make action movies what they are. Similarly, in his article “Suspenseful Situations: Melodramatic Narrative and the Contemporary Action Film” Scott Higgins describes the action movie narrative as “situational,” that is, including a series of situations that need to be resolved. These situations include everything from the major plot device resolved in explosions and car chases, to minor, but powerful, first and second act dramatics (Higgins 88).

[5] In *The Avengers*, Arroyo’s “disruption,” and the first of Higgins’ situations to be resolved, occurs when Loki of Asgard, Thor’s brother and the super villain of the film, makes a grand entrance into a S.H.I.E.L.D. (government agency) facility and steals the almighty alien power source, the “Tesseract.” It is at this point that our heroes, the Avengers (Thor, Tony “Iron Man” Stark, Bruce “Hulk” Banner, Natasha “Black Widow” Romanoff, and Steve “Captain America” Rogers), are assembled in order to stop Loki before he can use the Tesseract to bring an alien army to earth and achieve world domination. According to Higgins, the race against time is *the* staple of the genre, “The hero must accomplish a seemingly impossible task to save an innocent group of innocents before a firmly emphasized deadline” (Higgins 81). The deadline here is, of course, world domination.

[6] Whedon’s film uses another structural element described by Higgins precisely: “When the situation occurs in the final act, contemporary actions films often refine the race against time by imposing a double deadline; two threats converge on one timeline” (Higgins 81). At the end of the film, as the Avengers (now including Agent Clint “Hawkeye” Barton) race around New York battling aliens and try to stop Loki, they

suddenly have to stop a nuclear weapon intended to defeat the aliens from killing countless civilians as well.

[7] The action movie, structured in any way, would be nothing without the action sequences. These scenes create situations of high intensity risk for our action heroes and their evil counterparts. David Bordwell describes techniques used in these action sequences as “rapid editing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on close shots, and wide-ranging camera movements” (Bordwell 2006). He calls this an “intensified continuity system.” Purse expands on this idea, writing: “...the different filmmaking strategies Bordwell identifies are not simply all evident in the same sequence, but work together in an emphatic, insistent way for a particular purpose: to focus our attention on the spectacle of the body in action, its exertions and achievements, its persistence and agility, and the environmental risks and challenges it faces at each moment” (Purse 39). These action sequences are the most identifiable quality of the action film. The first one in *The Avengers* begins before the six-minute mark. It contains Loki’s violent magic, a gunfight, a car chase, and ends with an entire S.H.I.E.L.D. facility collapsing in a fiery explosion ten minutes into the film.

[8] In *Contemporary Action Cinema*, Lisa Purse writes:

Action cinema has always incorporated and repurposed tropes from other popular genres, most obviously the western, but also melodrama, romance, science fiction and horror to name the most common (Purse 2).

According to her, the genre is unstable, calling upon others for definition. A genre with this kind of malleability would seem less confined to its own rules than others, which

depend heavily on a unique set of tropes and themes. It is due to its lack of reliance on one complete definition that the action film is so easily reshaped and updated for new times and new audiences.

Super Femininity

[9] Unlike Purse, Scott Higgins believes that action movies can be classified as melodrama alone. He writes, “Rather than viewing the action film as a radical departure from classical conventions, we might well understand it as a continuation of melodrama’s legacy, a form that elaborates on structures that helped define the early life of the feature film” (Higgins 88). He notes that some modern action films meet all five of Ben Singer’s melodramatic qualifiers (*Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* 2002), including pathos, emotional intensification, moral polarization, sensationalism, and non-classical narrative structure (Higgins 78).

[10] Despite the structural agreement between the theories and *The Avengers*, the divergence begins here. *The Avengers* does not “court pathos” as described by Higgins, by “putting young women in jeopardy” as much as many of its contemporaries do (Higgins 78). In this movie, the women do not find themselves in any more jeopardy than the men do, and when they are in jeopardy, they certainly are not helpless to protect themselves. Prominent female characters include S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Maria Hill who rounds off the sequence of Loki’s theft by actively participating in a gunfight and a car chase, and Avenger Black Widow (S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Natasha Romanoff) who generally spends the entire movie being gutsier and savvier than all of the male characters.

[11] Joss Whedon undermines the courting of pathos with Agent Romanoff's first appearance in the film. She emerges into the movie tied to a chair in a warehouse interrogated in Russian by three large and intimidating men. The first time we see her face is when one of the men slaps it towards the camera. The men threaten her physically by tipping her chair backward over a ledge. She seems nervous, asking them questions like she may be ready to tell them what they want to know. The men are able to identify her, making her more vulnerable, saying "Your outdated information betrays you. The famous Black Widow, and she turns out to be simply another pretty face." They continue to bully and manhandle her, until one of the men's cellphone rings, and the voice on the other end demands to speak with "the woman" or else he will "blow up the block before [they] make the lobby." When they hand her the phone, the voice, S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson, tells Romanoff that he needs her to "come in." Her response: "Are you kidding? I'm working. I'm in the middle of an interrogation. This moron is giving me everything. Look, you can't pull me out of this right now." She reveals that she has been in control of the situation the entire time. When agent Coulson tells Romanoff that her companion Agent Barton has been compromised, she relents and takes down the entire room of men single handedly, while tied to a chair. She even goes so far as to break her chair and beat her captors with the pieces. This image calls to mind her heroine predecessor and fellow Whedon creation, Buffy Summers from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a teenage girl who has been known to shatter wooden objects and stake vampires with the shards. All the while, Agent Coulson listens to her fight through the phone with little concern. The scene concludes with Agent Romanoff picking up her high-heeled shoes

and cell phone, in a shot right out of a romantic comedy after a night on the town, and sauntering out of the warehouse while Coulson debriefs her.

[12] In *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, Geoff King describes the role of women in action movies as “[existing] on the margins” or alternatively, in a role reversal, as an action hero being “replaced by a woman” (King 109-110). Agent Romanoff’s fellow female action heroines, such as Ellen Ripley in the *Alien* series, often fall into this trap. Despite being one of the most famous action movie heroines of all time, according to NPR News show *All Things Considered*, the role of Ripley was actually written for a man, and it was Sigourney Weaver’s brilliant audition that convinced director Ridley Scott that Ripley could be a female character (Ulaby 2010). In this case, Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley was a literal replacement for a man. The news clip continues that for women playing roles written for men, “The action is all in tight, enclosed spaces... they are defending a tiny, confined piece of turf. Women are allowed to have their backs to the wall, but not to go out and conquer things” (Ulaby 2010). Romanoff takes this expectation one step further as well, as she stands side-by-side with her male counterparts defending both enclosed spaces like the flying headquarters, and huge turf like all of New York City.

[13] Romanoff becomes significant in this way because, while not hyper-feminine like Buffy Summers, she occupies a role that no man could. She occupies neither of King’s proposed roles in *The Avengers*. She is not a masculinized female leader, or a marginalized love interest. Instead, she is a significantly developed hero protagonist that exists alongside other significantly developed hero protagonists. Romanoff becomes a

whole person— Not a unisex action hero, but female, and not flawed because of it. King continues:

The way discourses of gender are manifested in these films certainly appears far from solidly fixed. To some extent they attempt to square the circle, to wallow in orgies of action and destruction conventionally characterized as ‘masculine’ but ameliorated or perhaps excused by a measure of ‘feminine’ domesticity and emotion. This is partly a matter of narrative thematics, partly of trying to include some cross-gender audience appeal (King 112).

Natasha Romanoff is not providing a “measure of feminine domesticity and emotion.” She is hardly more domesticated than Rambo in combat, and her emotional expressions are a manipulative technique as often as they are genuine, but still her physicality and mindsets are feminine. She manages to completely outwit Loki into admitting his motives in being captured, as he is in the second act of the film, by faking an emotional response and watching his sadistic mouth outrun his brain. Loki even dishes out a harshly gendered insult when he calls her a “mewling quim.” It is no accident that Agent Romanoff bests him so definitively immediately after. Her behavior, though calculating, is tempered by the true fear she exhibits when Bruce Banner turns into the Hulk and becomes completely uncontrollable. The juxtaposition of the most and least controlled of the Avengers creates a vulnerable, human side to Agent Romanoff that gives her dimension. At the beginning of the movie, when S.H.I.E.L.D. sends Black Widow to recruit Bruce Banner for the team, it takes one intentional angry outburst from Banner

and less than a second for Agent Romanoff to have her gun drawn and pointed in his face. “I’m sorry. That was mean,” he says, “I just wanted to see what you would do.” A close-up on her alarmed face, and a further 15 seconds before she lowers her weapon betrays her fear. Later, when Banner finally Hulks out for the first time, he does so against his will and right in front of Agent Romanoff who tries desperately to calm him down before he transforms. “I’m okay. We’re okay, right? Doctor. Bruce, you’ve got to fight it. This is just what Loki wants. We’re going to be okay. Listen to me.” As she lays trapped in an enclosed space with Banner who has lost control, Whedon uses more close-ups of her face as she struggles for a solution. When he finally transforms, she does not try to fight. She simply runs for her life. Lisa Purse describes this method as “action bodies” offering “fantasies of empowerment” through physical mastery, but not until after a hero has suffered a momentary loss of control over the action (Purse 45). The Hulk becomes Black Widow’s loss of control. By using this traditional action movie technique, Whedon creates for audiences the same fantasy of empowerment that they know well from watching other action movies, but applies it to a female character. In doing this, Whedon ensures audiences’ acceptance of Black Widow as a true action hero. He uses the language of the action movie to communicate to audiences how they should feel about the female characters.

[14] According to Frances H. Early, “...Female heroes have not been permitted to form a tradition of their own except as temporary warrior transgressors. Further, although honored as virtuous viragos, women warriors also have been viewed as inherently disruptive to the patriarchal order...” (Early 56). In this regard, Whedon brings the female warrior one step closer to legitimacy. While the movie exists within patriarchy,

Romanoff's character does nothing to disrupt the patriarchal order. She simply subverts negative patriarchal notions of femininity in an entertaining way. This, Whedon has said, was one of his goals in creating *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In an interview with *Time Magazine* he said, "If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism" (McDowell 8). In this way, Whedon impacts male viewers' perceptions of women and feminism by using their own language, an attractive lady in tight clothes, and enhances the tradition of female warriors.

Varying Masculinities

[15] Despite this enlightened character that Joss Whedon has presented, gender roles are not always treated this way in *The Avengers*. As Mark Gallagher states in his book *Action Figures: Men, Action Films, and Contemporary Adventure Narratives*:

Action films, like Hollywood blockbusters in general, tend to present conservative narratives and prosocial iconography for a target audience of adolescent males. While action films occasionally display progressive overtones, the surface narratives of such films appear to reinforce patriarchal structures of white male authority, privilege, and omnipotence (Gallagher 46).

[16] There is a moment of substance, as Captain America readies for battle with Romanoff and Stark. Agent Romanoff tells him to sit out the fight against Loki and Thor because they are "basically Gods." His response, delivered as a one-off joke, is "There's

only one God, Ma'am, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that." Read: Like a total Nancy. As kings, Thor and Loki are pretty big queens. They wear their hair long and flowing like their capes. Their armor is ornamented and dramatic. Loki's helmet has large golden horns. In comparison with clean-cut, all American boy Steve Rogers, they occupy a less firmly gendered space in the text. "Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?" remarks Iron Man when he first encounters Thor. In this way, Whedon destabilizes some of the work he does with Black Widow. By having Iron Man and Captain America form a boys' club from which Thor and Loki are excluded for being inadequately masculine, Whedon perpetuates patriarchal standards of masculinity. Thor's biceps, of course, get him invited in later, as even the manliest of men in the audience cannot deny his grandiose prowess. This tactic of Whedon's, while less progressive than his Black Widow approach might very well be an intentional nod to normative heterosexual male audiences. In this way, Whedon keeps traditional viewers of action movies interested while simultaneously giving them new attitudes to consider. These throwaway, but entertaining, comments provide validation for the "patriarchal structures of white male authority," while asking viewers to broaden their horizons.

[17] In Masani McGee's article "Big Men in Spangly Outfits: Spectacle and Masculinity in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*" she examines in detail what The Avengers' super hero suits convey to audiences.

While Thor's clothing can be excused given his status as a demi-god, and Stark gets by on his massive ego to explain his flashy costume, Rogers, as a formerly-average human, has made a deliberate attempt to display himself in a riot of color and patriotic symbolism. To the officers

[listening to him speak], wearing such an outfit is not emblematic of someone who possesses the power to lead—therefore their gaze is not one of admiration or wonder, but accusation (McGee 8-9).

In her view, even Captain Steve Rogers, the traditionalist throwback, becomes non-normative in his masculinity. Steve Rogers, however, is only one of Whedon's portrayals of masculinity.

[18] McGee goes on to discuss Dr. Banner's lack of bodily control as it pertains to his heroic masculinity. She writes, "Banner's lack of clear boundaries points to a possible instability of gender; the spectacle he creates is more than just an extreme of masculinity, but a collapsing of it" (McGee 7). Stark, another character whose body cannot be easily controlled due to an injury, takes a shine to Banner. Upon meeting a fellow scientist, he says:

It's good to meet you, Dr. Banner. Your work on anti-electron collisions is unparalleled. And I'm a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.

McGee elaborates:

Unlike some of the other male heroes who have had extensive depictions within the Phase One project, Stark is shown as possessing a body and masculinity that is imperfect. Beyond his injury, he is shown as constantly struggling to be a hero. Whereas Captain America and Thor very easily

fall into this role, Stark must constantly work to improve himself (McGee 5).

The fact that Stark's power does not come from his own body seems to be a sticking point for Rogers, whom he rubs the wrong way with a flippant attitude towards heroism. "Big man in a suit of armor," he says. "Take that off, what are you?" In this moment, Rogers conveniently forgets that before he was dosed with Stark's father's super soldier juice, he was physically far worse off than Stark is without his suit.

[19] According to David Magill's essay in *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*, "Whedon's television shows have consistently grappled with issues of gendered identity and power through their generic form and weekly content" (Magill 76). He has written strong female characters like teen queen vampire slayer Buffy Summers, and sassy working class matriarch Roseanne Connor, as well as men exhibiting wide ranging masculinities like Hoban Washburne and Xander Harris who present the softer, funnier side-kicks of masculinity, and the principled space loner Malcolm Reynolds. Magill continues, specifically about Whedon's *Firefly*:

Whedon destabilizes traditional definitions of masculinity by widening the range of individuals who can access masculine characteristics and by exposing gender's social creation, then interrogates various possible formations within contemporary masculinity as a means of supporting his vision of ethical manhood, which he defines as using the authority and power associated with masculinity in a socially responsible manner" (Magill 76-77).

In this way, Whedon himself demonstrates ethical manhood by using his influence as a writer and director to positively guide action movie audiences and their understandings of masculinity. In *The Avengers*, masculinity is accessible to the traditional, and the non-normative, the able-bodied, and those with less control over their physicality.

[20] Mark Gallagher writes:

Since the codification of the action genre's dominant narrative conflicts and conventions of visual style in the early 1980s, the action film has been the most visible site of male conflict and identity formation in popular global cinema. The genre's visibility derives both from the widespread global distribution of U.S. action films and from the literal visibility of its films' protagonists, usually solitary (or highly individualized), athletic, white men" (Gallagher 45).

Whedon continues the usage of the action film as a site of male identity formation, but forms a new, less constrained identity. He perhaps even expands the genre to some female identity formation by using traditional action movie tools to portray varying femininities as well. In this way, Whedon forms more identities.

Soft-Core Violence

[21] Violence, while generally considered integral to action movies and action sequences, comes in many different forms. There is, of course, the distant fiery explosion, the vicious close-up face punching, and every level of brutality in between. The person-

to-person violence within *The Avengers* falls low on the scale. The violence tends to be cartoonish, causing impermanent damage. Lisa Purse writes:

The ‘rules’ of the fictional universe in which these bodies move are often carefully designed to preserve a viscerally felt sense of physical effort. 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 (Purse 46).

While Whedon maintains a certain amount of reality as far as physics are concerned, he uses a cartoonish approach when it comes to violence between the male characters.

Whedon’s main tool in this operation is the “Hulk Smash.” When Hulk cuts Loki off mid angry rant, lifts him up over his head, and then smashes him into the floor several times, Loki’s body breaks the floor with the force of the impact. After fighting together to defeat several alien creatures, in another comic moment, Hulk punches Thor into a wall with no warning or provocation. The surprise of these encounters demands a more visceral reaction than most of the other scenes of violence, and yet, they are comical because the violence occurs between three characters who are essentially indestructible. “You can’t [kill me]. I know. I tried,” says Banner in response to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s precautionary Hulk cage. In a similarly comedic moment between Stark and Thor, Stark head-butts Thor with his helmet. Uninjured, Thor head-butts him back, sending him flying with a comical metal clang. This kind of violence could be seen as a truer reading of the portrayal of violence in the source comics, with onomatopoeia on full display.

[22] Whedon shows more realistic, albeit minor, physical injury and exertion with Black Widow, who gets dirtied and bloody during the battle of New York, and the other human, Hawkeye, when he crashes through a window. In this way Whedon de-emphasizes violence as imperative to fantasies of masculinity. When the action could have just as well come from a classic Warner Bros. cartoon, childhood or boyhood becomes adequately masculine, and masculinity loses its always-just-out-of-reach prestige. As Banner, Loki, and Thor do not truly risk their lives, and Rogers and Stark exist within the protection of Stark created super-bodies (one human, one metal) it is not this sacrifice that creates men. Or, if it is this sacrifice, Black Widow is among the truest, manliest heroes of them all.

[23] In another deviation from past action movies, twice during the film Loki surrenders to The Avengers without a violent showdown. After his run from the S.H.I.E.L.D. facility at the start, he is tracked down by Rogers, Stark, and Romanoff. Though Stark taunts Loki, “Make a move, Reindeer Games” – another slight on his fashion choices, after he has been backed into a corner by the team, he concedes without a fight. Again, at the conclusion of the film, after the Chitauri aliens have been defeated and sent back to space, and the nuclear bomb headed for New York also sent to space, the final standoff between The Avengers and Loki, the real villain, ends without violence. Instead of fighting to the death as the Chitauri did, he surrenders. Unlike most action movies, the plot does not culminate in one last violent confrontation, and in this moment rather than cowardly, Loki seems smart. He has lost the battle, but will go on to wreak future havoc. While the action genre may inherit many tropes from the Western genre, it

is not slave to them, or to any other genre, and therefore does not truly require or rely on a shootout at the end.

An Unlikely Team

[24] In his essay “Six Reasons Why Joss Whedon is the Perfect Director for *The Avengers*,” Matthew Hurd writes, “Why do these stories of vampires and werewolves, spaceships and demons, work so well? In truth, it comes back to a deceptively simple starting point: group dynamism. Each of Joss Whedon’s television series centers around a group of people and the dynamics within said groups. Everything else grows out of it” (Hurd 451). The Avengers themselves come from different origins, different countries, different decades even, and in this light, the master of the team dynamic suddenly seems a perfectly logical choice to help audiences understand why these characters belong together, and to make them relevant in the year 2012.

[25] By early in the second act, there have been physical altercations between Stark and Rogers, Stark and Thor, Rogers and Thor, and very nearly between Romanoff and Banner. As if the dynamics were not confusing enough, Avenger S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Clint Barton (Hawkeye) has been kidnapped and brainwashed by Loki, and is fighting against the rest of the Avengers until the third act. In an interview on the Nerdist Podcast, Whedon himself said what an unlikely team-up the Avengers make.

I grew up reading *The Avengers* where they all were on a team together, and it never occurred to me until much later in life that they did not belong on a team together...This team makes no sense... except that we need them. That’s the only reason. It makes it much harder on some levels

because with the X Men, it's like look we all have the same problem, we all have the same metaphor, we all have the same outfits, but with the avengers they are very deliberately different. They don't make sense together... I'd seen them as teammates my whole life, so I didn't have this thing of, and I think this is how a lot of these movies fail, I didn't have to make it work for me... And so I didn't have to figure it out and then present it. I just had to present it. I had to figure out how to make the audience see what I already saw (Nerdist 2013).

Whedon shows audiences what happens when pieces that do not fit are put together. The fighting can be attributed to the clashing of large egos, and the ensuing power struggle. According to Søren Ervø in *Moulding Masculinities*, "From [the] close relationship between masculinity and crisis it follows that the representation of an idealized or stabilized masculinity functions to repress or work out anxieties regarding flux and change in the male role...the crisis of masculinity is due to the fact that men try to hold on to their social power across new circumstances" (Ervø 155). In other words, the macho posturing is borne of anxiety. It is in this light that we explore the unlikely, anxiety-ridden team-up of the Avengers.

[26] Eric Lichtenfeld explains the action genre with a list of "raw materials" that are often included as necessary elements.

A loner hero; his battles for justice, if not the law; his slain best friend (also combatant); a murdered love interest; vengeance; a past he is trying to live down; a burden he must live with, the burden of being 'the best;' a

governmental bureaucracy willing to betray and sacrifice him; industrial setting brutal beatings; visually exotic killings; an array of impressive weapons; explosions; one-liners; chases and crashes; and a depraved enemy (Lichtenfeld 1).

The Avengers, with their varied backgrounds and ways of being recruited, combine to bring together all of these “raw materials.” While they are all initially loner heroes who battle for justice, it is Steve Rogers whose best friend was slain during WWII in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), Thor with his lost (but not technically murdered) love interest in *Thor* (2011), Bruce Banner with the past to live down (“Last time I was in New York I kind of broke...Harlem.”), Tony Stark who is burdened with being the best (“Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.”), and Romanoff and Barton who operate under S.H.I.E.L.D. and can be sacrificed. It is as though Whedon wanted to demonstrate that only combined can the Avengers fulfill all of these requirements, and then overcome the constraints of the action genre by resolving these tensions and acting as a team with their own intentions and purposes.

[27] In the creation of a team, the most important part of the movie, the singular loner hero, the pinnacle of masculinity, is rendered less powerful in comparison to the mighty Avengers. Rugged individuality as a staple of heroics, as gifted to the action genre by the western, is examined and found wanting. Instead, Whedon shows audiences that a real hero needs men and women, friends and family, and not just enemies. Whedon uses this setup as an opportunity to showcase each of the Avengers individually within the action sequences, but also demonstrate their true strength as a team. Throughout the

film each of the Avengers has at least one moment of focused, individual excellence. For example, during the New York battle, Thor summons glorious bolts of lightning and reflects them from the Chrysler Building. Banner also transforms into Hulk just in time to stop the Chitauri ship from taking out the whole team with his bare hands. These moments are standard to the action genre, but are punctuated with moments of extraordinary teamwork as well. Again during the battle Captain America uses his shield to boost Black Widow high into the air so she can latch onto an enemy ship. Similarly, Iron Man picks up and flies Hawkeye to his firing post, saying, “Clench up Legolas.” There are as many moments of superior teamwork as there are of singular ability.

Conclusion

[28] Scott Higgins describes action films politely by saying, “Like a stage melodrama, the action film knits together strong pictorial moments, sometimes favoring situation over strict plausibility or even character motivation” (Higgins 79). The low expectations placed upon blockbuster action films, at this point in their continuation appears to have informed much of the scholarship relating to the subject. The constant rehashing of the same generic action plots, with little emotional depth in the past may have clouded the big picture of the genre’s capabilities as a transformable template.

[29] Whedon’s decision to take on the blockbuster action movie at this point in his career is unexpected only in light of the ideals of past action movies, since he is known for taking on wide ranging genres from horror and science fiction to the television situation comedy. With each of these projects, however, Whedon has used similar

techniques to mold his audiences. He used his spot in the driver's seat to stand in defense of the blockbuster action movie by showing audiences what it could be instead of what it has been. He allows audiences the chance to explore new depths from a comfortable position as action movie fans, expressing a faith in both the action genre and viewers alike. By presenting audiences with a familiar shell of characters, setting, story, and genre, he was able to wrap greater ideas, and broader, healthier gender representations and alternative masculinities into a recognizable form, and father a new kind of action movie fan.

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