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Big Men in Spangly Outfits: Spectacle and Masculinity in Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*

Introduction

[1] After being banished from his extraterrestrial home of Asgard, the protagonist of Kenneth Branagh's 2011 film *Thor* finds himself learning to live among humans. A scene in the second act of the film features the character dressing in human clothes for presumably the first time, and long, lingering shots display every facet of his muscular torso. Each shot frames him either at the center of the screen, or lights his body so he is the focal image for the viewer. The few moments that do not directly depict Thor's body are the reaction shots to his entrance by the female characters, both of whom are equally enraptured with the image he presents. Thor is presented in an unabashedly sexual manner here, with no efforts to mitigate the spectator's view of his body.

[2] According to film critic Steve Neale, this isn't supposed to happen. In his 1983 essay "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema," he insists that "we see male bodies stylized and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not direct, it is heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved. And those looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression" (18). Neale argues that depicting an unmitigated erotic look of a male figure creates a homoerotic impulse that most male-dominated action films during the time period in which he was writing did their best to avoid. Beyond acts of violence on-screen, the only other way to present a male character as the subject of an erotic look is to feminize him in some manner.

[3] *Thor* and the other films that make up Marvel's Phase One project (2008-2012) challenge Neale's assertions in a variety of ways. The costumes of the male characters place their bodies on display in a manner that insists upon an erotically-charged gaze, yet because of the concepts and ideals that those costumes may represent (such as patriotism or technological superiority in the case of Captain America and Iron Man respectively), that gaze does not have to be mitigated in the way Neale describes. The films of the Phase One project, and particularly Joss Whedon's 2012 film *The Avengers*, are allowed to expand upon how the

male body is portrayed, even beyond previous entries within the existing Marvel corpus. The physical forms of male characters are depicted in a manner that denotes the fluidity of male identity within the world they inhabit. Unlike Neale's construction of masculinity, which tends towards a binary of masculine versus feminine, Marvel's male heroes can operate within a spectrum of roles that allows for feminized and/or alternative portrayals of gender, hetero- and homoeroticism, and spectacle.

[4] My analysis is designed to examine how Neale's discussion of masculinity functions in a contemporary context. I place Neale's article in a chronology with Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative in the Cinema." Just as Mulvey's essay was a relevant and important starting point to discuss women in film, the Neale piece made significant inroads in opening up the critical conversation within feminist film studies to include portrayals of men. Yet also like the Mulvey article, there are limitations in the author's analysis of cinematic depictions of masculinity and how the spectator gazes at those depictions. I would like to expand upon Neale's analysis of masculine spectacle, and demonstrate how critically viewing the male body has shifted in the intervening decades since his publication. Beyond considering the erotics of the audiences' gaze, I think it is equally necessary to discuss the instability of gender within these films. The modern superhero film, being informed as it is by the medium of comic books, inherits the same fluidity its predecessor possesses in regards to identity and gender. Understanding masculinity as fluid is not only a necessary aspect of grasping how these superheroes are depicted—it is essential to understanding the various ways Whedon portrays both manhood and gender within his work.

[5] The purpose of this essay is to explore how alternative masculinities and alternative ways of seeing the male body can be explored through Marvel's Phase One project, in addition to whether or not gender is being disrupted by these portrayals. My primary method of attack will be to consider how the superhero's costume and body functions as a symbol of ambiguous and changeable identity. While a variety of critical texts will assist in developing this argument, a particularly significant asset is Laura Marks' ideas concerning erotic looking, and non-psychoanalytic forms of spectatorship will be essential in developing a framework for alternative ways to view masculinity in these films. The work of Vivian Sobchack will also be an important part of my analysis, particularly her work exploring disability and prosthesis. While all of the Phase One films will be considered, much of my analysis will be focused around *The Avengers*. I am interested in how the influence of writer and director Joss Whedon has impacted divergent notions of masculinity, and particularly how his feminist politics and past works have influenced his approach to the male body.

Masculine Bodies

[6] The male form is typically depicted within the superhero film as the epitome of physical perfection—a form of iconography that is highlighted and emphasized by the costumes they wear. Vicki Karaminas asserts that "as an embodied practice, fashion succeeds in signifying industrial strength associated with the ideal hypermuscular superhero body; the look of power, virility and prowess" (2). Many of the superheroes within Marvel's roster have costumes that are designed to constantly reinforce this principle.   This tactic is most apparent in characters like Captain America and Thor—the mail that covers Thor's arms, for example, is molded in such a way that we see the definition of his biceps and triceps. Equally important to the structure of characters' costumes is how they change over the course of Phase One, especially Captain America's. The first costume that the Captain, also known as Steve Rogers, wears is a self-reflexive nod to the attire the comic book-version of the character originally wore. His second costume, though certainly patriotic, was a generally practical uniform not very dissimilar from that of the soldiers he served with during World War II. The final costume Captain America wears is an update specifically designed for *The Avengers*, and it is here that we see a marked shift in how the outfit is designed to enhance the spectacle of his body. The costume Rogers wears in this film is more form-fitting, clinging to his body in a manner that, much like Thor's costume, is designed to show off his musculature to the greatest extent possible. The baggy, military-like uniform of the previous film here gives way to the fully-fledged superhero attire found in the original comics. Ironically, it has more in common with a stage costume he wears during the war bonds montage within *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The last version of his costume demonstrates that he is meant to be a spectacle for an audience to see, both intra- and extra-diegetically—the civilians are awed by his appearance within the film, and we as the audience see Rogers as not only a soldier, but a superhero in the strictest sense of the term.

[7] Neale also asserts in his essay that in film, men "are on display, certainly, but there is no cultural or cinematic convention which would allow the male body to be presented in the way that [Marlene] Dietrich so often is in Sternberg's films" (18). In the early 1980s when the author's article was written, this may in fact have been true—films such as *First Blood* (1982) or later *Die Hard* (1988) show the male body as a constant scene of often graphic violence and aggression. Marvel's films, however, provide a multitude of examples refuting that point. Though there are multiple scenes where an erotic gaze is mediated by violence as Neale insists upon, there are also a considerable number of images that do not contain such a barrier. *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* do the most out of the Phase One films to uphold a more traditional form of masculinity, yet they are also the films that offer more

erotically-charged views of the male body. Perhaps more so than any of the other Phase One films, Rogers and Thor's partially-naked bodies are on display, and specific attention is placed on other characters (who are often female) gazing at their bodies. This focus may be a result of the particular styles found in these films. The types of narratives presented here are in some respects throwbacks to previous eras of film and types of male bodies portrayed within them. For example, *Captain America: The First Avenger* obviously and deliberately shares an aesthetic with films of the 1940s, specifically war films and musicals of the time period. Nicola Rehling argues that the only way to depict the masculine body as a spectacle without resorting to self-reflexivity or parody is to revert to a more anachronistic mode of cinema, such as the sword-and-sandal type epics like *Gladiator* (2000) or *Troy* (2004) that reasserted themselves in the early part of the last decade (110). With this statement in mind, it could be argued that the superhero genre as a concept has adopted anachronism to an extent in order to display these forms of masculinity.

[8] Rehling's argument, however, does not take into account how the tropes of the superhero genre as they are formulated in the Phase One films are dependent on self-reflexivity. Part of this is due to an aesthetic of realism present in the genre since its reemergence in the last decade. For a post-9/11 audience, George Reeves' Superman of the 1950s or even Tim Burton's 1989 version of Batman are contextualized within very different historical and cinematic moments. Without the ability to acknowledge the spectacle that the superhero provides, these films would run the risk of disrupting the suspension of disbelief for the audience. *Thor* provides an extended example of this strategy throughout the film. In the first act, we are shown multiple scenes of the protagonist that emphasize the attractiveness of his body and particularly his skill as a fighter. Yet those images are disrupted when he is brought down to mortal status by his father Odin. Thor becomes a laughing stock for much of the second act as he is shown attempting to force an alien and aggressive worldview on normal humans, complete with pratfalls and embarrassing breaches of Earth-etiquette. The viewer is encouraged to laugh not only at the farce of the situation, but how incongruent the character is with a modern sensibility. While Thor may make sense as a comic book character, he is out of place as a cinematic one. The character can could be seen as a throwback to some of the male fantasy heroes of the eighties, particularly the ones found in films such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) or *Masters of the Universe* (1987)—these stories contained protagonists that were unambiguously invested in forms of masculinity that emphasize both the body and male dominance. The events of the film then prove the character's worth not only to his peers within the film but also to the audience—he must be found worthy of being an action hero in a world where this type of character is out of date. Self-reflexivity is employed here to poke fun at prior

versions of masculine spectacle. The acknowledgement that one form of masculinity is somewhat old-fashioned does not preclude the film from engaging in the typical tropes of the superhero genre, however.

[9] Self-reflexivity is only one tactic that the Phase One films employ to problematize masculinity; the other male heroes actively deconstruct the concept. Iron Man's armor subverts any attempt to define a model form of masculinity, as the character both embodies and rejects traditional signifiers such as physical strength or dominance. While Tony Stark's armor covers his entire body, it is also clear that the suit has been designed to reflect the idealized body of the typical superhero (the metal of the suit is constructed in a way that reflects a muscular human). Yet while the character is typically shown as having a muscular living-body, that body is still effectively disabled by the injury that leads him to become a hero. Stark himself (and not without a hint of sarcasm) describes his suit as a "high-tech prosthesis" (*Iron Man 2*). Yet when we look at the definition of a prosthesis, "a device, either external or implanted, that substitutes for or supplements a missing or defective part of the body," we are able to glimpse how both Stark and the film's definition of what the suit is reflects a possible evolution of what the idealized superhero body now consists of—the superhero form must be something that is constructed, something created to not mask but balance the very realistic social and physical flaws that a conventional human being would have.

[10] This is not to say that the Iron Man suit is itself what makes Stark heroic; this would, as Vivian Sobchack has discussed, create a circumstance where the prosthetic in question is viewed as not only separate from the body, but also its role as a part of his lived experience (215).   The spectacle of Stark's armor is not enough to provide an example of an ideal male. 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. Linda Holmes mentions in her review of *Iron Man 3* that, "Stark… is a reflexively selfish, self-promoting, ego-driven person with a genuine tendency toward bluster and rudeness" (Holmes).

[11] Stark's moral and physical struggle is most clearly demonstrated in a scene from *The Avengers*, where Stark and Rogers argue over his qualifications as a hero. The following exchange outlines two versions of masculinity, one modern and one traditional:

> Steve Rogers: Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?
>
> Tony Stark: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.

> Steve Rogers: I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.
>
> Tony Stark: I think I would just cut the wire.
>
> Steve Rogers: Always a way out... You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero. (*The Avengers*)

Though Rogers is mostly concerned with Stark's flippant manner of approaching heroism, it is still his armor, the primary extension of his body, which bears a great deal of the Captain's scorn. The Captain views the armor as a weakness, separate from Stark's body—as we can see a few scenes later, Rogers is confident that his physical might is able to beat what was created by Stark's mind. Even the terminology he uses in his argument with Stark points to an emphasis on the body, and particularly the strength of the body.

[12] Sobchack would relate the conflict surrounding Stark's body to a discrepancy in language, particularly as it relates to the theoretical metaphors surrounding the concept of the prosthetic. She affirms in her text *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* that "the metaphor of the prosthetic and its technological interface with the body is predicated on a naturalized sense of the body's previous and privileged 'wholeness'" (210). That is, the error made by Rogers in regards to Stark's suit is reflective of thinking that considers the non-disabled body to be inherently stable and complete. Tony Stark's narrative over the course of the Phase One films (and perhaps realized in the Phase Two film *Iron Man 3*), is the story of a man attempting to not simply rebuild his life, but to build it—the notion of wholeness as Sobchack describes it then, is a process rather than an inherent quality one possesses, superhero or no.

[13] In a similar fashion, Bruce Banner, aka the Hulk, also does not possess an intact body as Rogers might conceptualize it. Both he and Stark are at odds with the types of masculinities represented by their peers. Banner complicates many of the correlations between the ideal male form and its definition through the superhero costume, as he is famously lacking any clothing other than a torn pair of pants, almost as if his physicality has moved beyond any message that may be conveyed by mere clothing. Yet such an extreme display does not elevate Banner above the other male forms, as he is bestial and primal in a manner that creates a fearsome aura around him. Yet for all of his power, The Hulk is more disabled than Stark; his inability to control his body separates him from his fellow heroes, as the mark of many action heroes is the strong level of control they possess over their bodies. In

her discussion of the 1980s "hard body" action hero, Susan Jeffords asserts that hard bodies sought a sense of personal and environmental mastery, and that "such bodies assist in the confirmation of this mastery by themselves refusing to be 'messy' or 'confusing,' by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries for their own decision-making" (27). These bodies, products of Reagan-era political ideology, are meant to project an aura that assumes, much as Rogers did in the previous example, that the physical body should be defined by its solid, uncontestable form.

[14] Yet given that the Hulk defies such a concept at every turn, he would slide into what Jeffords terms as the "soft body," opposing the values of strength and containment possessed by the hard body. As a rather exaggerated heir of the Jekyll and Hyde tradition, he represents not only monstrosity and degeneracy through his grotesque form, but also intellectualism; his distorted body is brought about by his own experimentation as a scientist. Just as Banner lacks the capability to control his physical form, his intellectual pursuits are equally unrestrained, leading to the uncontrollable creature he struggles to suppress. While not explicitly stated within Jeffords' discussion of the hard-body hero, the institutions that this archetype reacts against (communism, feminism, technologically-dependent societies) were grounded in a scholarly mentality that directly opposed the physical dominance of the Reagan-era heroes. The mind, unlike the constructed hard-body, does not possess the "clear boundaries" that are a requirement for this type of male figure.

[15] I would argue that 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. Defining masculinity with the Phase One project means confronting past ideologies of what it means to be a male hero. If both Stark and Banner's bodies have in some way disrupted a conventional view of the male body, and thus the action hero, then it serves to argue that they also are disrupting the spectacle presented by other male characters. We cannot look at their bodies, or see the team function as a unit without also being reminded of their otherness.   But while they are upsetting that spectacle, they are also creating a new one, one that informs the depiction all male heroes within these films. When Stark speaks with Banner about the effect his armor has had on his life, he insists that "it's part of me now; it's not just armor" (*The Avengers*).   By the end of the film, Banner has also come to view his otherness as an integrated aspect of his body and psyche. Rather than a sense of wholeness based on a false sense of unity, the divergent masculinities within the Phase One films point towards a sense of the body, and thus masculinity, that is inherently unstable and undefined.

[16] It is appropriate that the resounding theme of *The Avengers* is a team of disparate individuals finding a way to cooperate with one another, given that the various types of masculinities within the team must do the same. The totalizing concept of maleness that was constructed by Reagan-era action films here breaks under the weight of changing political and social boundaries that welcome the uncertainty that comes with fluctuating gender roles. Disrupting the physical bodies of these characters, how they are depicted, and how we as the audience are meant to look at them emphasizes how the Phase One films challenge a view of masculinity that insists upon one way to perform the role of a male superhero. In response to those performances, the audience is equally reconsidering how their look has been manipulated in the past, and how it can be reformulated in the present.

Spectatorship

[17] Gazing upon the body of a superhero is not only contextually relevant, but a necessary aspect of the genre. From the earliest Superman comics until the most recent comic films, we are constantly presented with images of people looking at these men and women as they commit their acts of heroism. Many if not most films in the genre are designed in such a way that the events of the story will eventually lead up to a scene or scenes where the general public is depicted as looking up at the sky as the protagonist(s) fly or somehow travel overhead. In *The Avengers*, almost every hero is given a scene in which he/she is placed above a crowd of people in a manner that allows them to be looked up at. One of the most notable scenes where this happens is when Captain America addresses a group of police officers during the final battle of the film.

[18] As a non-flying hero, he is largely relegated to the ground, yet it is significant that his placement within the mise-en-scene allows him the ability to look down on the assembled group as they look up at him. There is a strong connection here between authority and the Captain's look, yet that authority is partly jeopardized by his costume. When one member of the assembled officers indignantly asks "Why the hell should I take orders from you?" it is as if to say "Why should I take orders from someone *dressed* like you?" The impulse towards realism within modern superhero films has disrupted a blanket acceptance of Captain America's costume, which, given the stars and stripes theme, is in some respects the most grandiose of the team's outfits. 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, 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. Through the assembled police officers, the film acknowledges the power of the audience's gaze, one that has grown to be critical of monolithic symbols represented by the stars-and-stripes Rogers adopts as an emblem. However, that gaze is also immediately taken in by the spectacle provided by the Captain when he effortlessly defeats a group of Chitauri invaders that attack soon after. The agency of the audience's gaze has been questioned in the earlier *Captain America* as well, particularly in terms of its ability to remain objective in the face of spectacle.

[19] As mentioned previously, Neale argues that when men are explicitly made to be the subject of an erotic gaze, they are almost always feminized. The author states that "instances of 'feminization' tend also to occur in the musical, the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way" (18). *Captain America: The First Avenger* incorporates elements of the masculine spectacle found in the musical genre without the inevitable feminization that Neale pointed towards. After Steve Rogers' transformation into the titular Captain, he is stuck selling war bonds in a travelling show. A montage follows where the initially uncomfortable hero slowly begins to accept his role as a celebrity; he is backed by a group of chorus girls while touting the propaganda of the United States government.

[20] While Rogers isn't dancing or singing as he might be in a traditional musical, he is still incorporated into the performance of the chorus girls in a way that draws the gaze of the spectator to him. We watch him as he strides on the stage in a similar manner to the way we watch the line formed by the dancers. If we look at his costume in comparison to the women, the blue of his shirt matches the halters of their dresses, the white on his sleeves matches their gloves, and the red and white stripes equally match their skirts. While it could be argued that the chorus girls are presented as an accessory of sorts to the Captain's image, the montage presents Rogers and the women in such a way that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them initially; it is not until the later part of the montage that he begins to take center stage, so to speak. Though he shares an obvious connection with the women through their respective costumes and works within the spectacle that they are all creating, he has the ability to move against the cohesive, mechanical line that the dancers form. In his short essay on the popular groups of chorus girls that traveled Europe during the 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer likens these types of performers to a disembodied machine reflecting the economic devastation that occurred in the aftermath of the 1920s (565). In the case of Rogers, they are similarly linked to an economic apparatus, in this instance the selling of war bonds. The protagonist's costume would seemingly link him to that machine, and perhaps the feminization

invited by the spectacle of the performance. However, because he can move against the grain, and because his body can assert itself as a presence beyond the mechanized group, the spectator can see him as a masculine and potentially heroic figure.

[21] However, a later montage in the film places him within another group, this time as a fully incorporated part of it. Once Rogers is accepted as a true soldier by his military superiors, he begins fighting full-time against the Nazis and Hydra, the film's primary antagonists. At the beginning of the montage, he is shown in multiple shots with his personal squadron of commandos as they advance on the enemy throughout Europe. Though he still stands in front of the group and his body is shown occasionally moving against the militarized line the men form, his body is not placed in contrast to the other soldiers; he instead complements their movements. Kracauer mentions at another point in his essay that the chorus girls "correspond in some other way to the ideal of the machine" (565). It seems that while Rogers was performing the role of Captain America, and thus all of the ideas about masculinity that are associated with the role, the audience is visually able to place him outside of the construct created by economic and militarized forces.

[22] The viewer is cognizant of the role he plays as a hero, and can maintain a distance from the machine he works within. We can also criticize that machine, such as when we see him drawing a caricature of himself as a performing monkey. It is when he becomes Captain America, rather than just performing the role, that we stop seeing him as differentiated from the group and what it represents. Much like Kracauer's chorus girls, Rogers has become disembodied. The very beginning of the aforementioned montage features an extreme close-up of the Captain that depicts three shots of his uniform before the viewer is able to finally see his full body. The viewer is drawn once again to his costume, as we are close enough to see the weave of its fabric and the scuff marks on his shield. The tactile elements of these images that initially prevent the viewer from comprehending Rogers' entire body points to the notion that as a spectacle, his body has become increasingly abstract as it has engaged with the type of masculinity that allows him to act as a hero.

[23] By the time that Rogers arrives in *The Avengers*, he attempts to reconfigure his body in a way that presents a stable masculinity, often by contrasting himself with Stark. The film attempts to create a binary between the two, and the audience is presented with multiple images that would affirm such a notion—placing Stark in street clothes instead of the full uniform that Rogers is typically portrayed in, for example. However, his body has already been destabilized, and will continue to be so throughout the rest of the film. Rather than seek to re-attain a stable masculinity, it becomes increasingly clear that instability is the desired state

for both Rogers and the audience. As fans of the film's director, unstable manhood is a concept we know all too well.

Unstable/Reinterpreted Masculinity

[24] My analysis of the Phase One films could not be complete without considering how Joss Whedon's own perceptions of masculinity, which have been frequently explored in his previous works, has affected the portrayal of these characters. Whedon's role as an auteur guides every aspect of masculine spectacle and eroticism throughout *The Avengers*, even if he is dealing with an established set of characters that are not his own. The largest departure from Whedon's previous work is quite obviously the lack of a female-centered narrative. With the exception of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008) and *Angel* (1999-2004), where the narrative was almost always focused on or around the male main character, each of his series and films have either had a female lead (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997-2003], *Dollhouse* [2009-2010]), or a woman has driven the major events of the plot (*Firefly* [2002], *Serenity* [2005]). Without his typical concentration, Whedon's approach to filmmaking has, if not changed, then certainly evolved. If this is the case, then alternate forms of conceptualizing spectatorship are needed. The work of Laura Marks is significant here, specifically her ideas regarding a form of spectatorship that is contextualized through the sexual practices of sadomasochism or S/M. She describes this type of looking as having the "privilege of temporary alignment with a controlling, dominating, and objectifying look…It also includes the pleasure of giving up to the other's control, experiencing oneself as an object, being a 'bottom' (Marks, ch. 5). Engaging with a way of looking that allows the viewer to both command and relinquish control of their gaze encourages audiences to see how Whedon is advancing alternate forms of masculinity in his various televisual and cinematic texts.

[25] The male bodies found in most of Whedon's corpus are noted for their fragility, setting them in opposition to female bodies, which typically are seen as strong and even invulnerable in some cases. The vampires Angel and Spike, both of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and later *Angel*, were supernaturally gifted with increased fortitude and strength, yet they could also be easily destroyed (by a wooden stake and/or sunlight). During their time on both series, their bodies were frequently shown as broken and battered, far more than any of their human peers, male or female. (Editors' note: See McCracken.) Many of the scenes that depicted them in victimized ways were done in a sexual manner.   During season two of *Buffy* for example, Angel is kidnapped and tortured by Drusilla, his crazed progeny. Angel is shown tied to a bed while his former associate straddles him, pouring holy water over his bare chest.

This particular scene is a useful example of Marks' framework. The scene vacillates from showing Angel as submissive while being tortured to the character subtly taking control through his emotional manipulation of Spike and Drusilla:

> Spike: I'll see him die soon enough. I've never been much for the pre-show.
>
> Angel: Too bad. That's what Drusilla likes best, as I recall.
>
> Spike: What's that supposed to mean?
>
> Angel: Ask her. She knows what I mean.
>
> Spike: Well?
>
> Drusilla: (to Angel) Shhh! Grrrruff! Bad dog.
>
> Angel: You shoulda let me talk to him, Dru. Sounds like your boy could use some pointers. She likes to be teased.
>
> Spike: Keep your hole shut!
>
> Angel: Take care of her, Spike. The way she touched me just now? I can tell when she's not satisfied. ("What's My Line, Part 2")

This exchange places Spike standing above Angel while he removes his restraints, but it is Angel, seemingly harmless while tied up and injured, that has control over not only the discussion between Spike and Drusilla, but also the viewer's gaze. The audience is able to take pleasure in his body as it is exposed and dominated, while also finding enjoyment in the knowledge that he can control the situation through his own sexual confidence and prowess.

[26] While the sexual undercurrent found in the *Buffy* episode is largely absent in *The Avengers*, Whedon still employs similar tactics that reflect Marks' S/M framework. This can be seen when Black Widow, otherwise known as Natasha Romanoff, goes to question the villain Loki. He paces around the cell that he's contained in, seemingly restrained from doing any harm. His voice and demeanor is soft, even once Romanoff begins to question him about her partner Hawkeye. For the viewer, the image he presents is still sinister, but also calm; we are lulled into a false sense of security by his reserved appearance. This drastically changes a few minutes later when he cruelly gloats over what he plans to do to both Romanoff and Hawkeye once he's escaped.   Much like the *Angel* example, we can see him as both passive and active, submissive and dominant.   But even this is confounded a few moments later when we discover Romanoff's ruse:

[Natasha sounds like she's weeping]

Natasha Romanoff: You're a monster!

Loki: Oh, no. You brought the monster.

[Suddenly Natasha turns to face Loki again but with no evidence of tears]

Natasha Romanoff: So, Banner? That's your play?

Loki: What?

[Natasha talks into her earpiece]

Natasha Romanoff: Loki means to unleash the Hulk. Keep Banner in the lab, I'm on my way. Set the door locked. [beat] Thank you for your cooperation. (*The Avengers*)

The audience at this point has seen Loki as vulnerable, malicious, and confused within the space of a few minutes, yet it is the latter affect that is perhaps most significant here. Confusion plays a special role in the context of masculinity. In this one instance, Loki's control over the situation (and Black Widow) completely vanishes. While we could look at this as an instance of a man succumbing to the manipulations of a deceptive woman, I would argue that this scene is illustrating how malleable the gender roles we occupy, and thus, the way the audiences sees them, really are. Marks proposes that identification should be "a contingent, experimental process…a viewer can make a pact with many viewing situations, in which one agrees, under limited circumstances, to occupy a certain position" (ch. 5). If what makes a character "masculine" can be so easily thwarted both in the context of the narrative and through how the audience sees the image they present, then placing restrictions on spectatorial viewing and desire becomes increasingly untenable.

[27] Whedon designs each of his male characters to trouble the very idea of being male, whether implicitly like Loki or explicitly like Angel. In her discussion of masculinity in Angel, Lorna Jowett insists that "by virtue of being wounded, open, permeable, but heroes nevertheless, they all question why anyone might want to be 'like other men' when alternative masculinities are so much more attractive than conventional, monolithic masculinity" (49). *The Avengers* and the Phase One films as a whole explore this concept, with each character attempting to define and exist within these alternative masculinities. Depicting gender as an unstable, tractable, contingent idea encourages audiences to see maleness in a way that is ultimately relevant to owning unique ways of viewing the world around them.

Conclusion

[28] The Phase One project is not a perfect example of how superhero films are transcending traditional ways that gender is depicted and perceived. There are many scenes within film series that do their best to reinforce Neale's framework—these are, after all, films within the superhero genre. Most films of this type are structured in a fashion that emphasizes violent mediations of the look towards the male body, simply by ensuring that the protagonists will instigate an aggressive conflict with the story's villain. The audience will be drawn to the characters' bodies, and those bodies will be marked by bruises, wounds, and all of the assorted signs of physical confrontation. The genre as a whole has a great deal of work to do before the alternative forms of masculinity imagined in Whedon's film can truly be realized.

[29] Yet by invoking spectacle and calling attention to the tropes and ideologies surrounding male bodies, Whedon ensures we can never forget or naturalize traditional forms of masculinity. The mutable nature of the heroes' costumes and bodies ensures that the audience will never have a concrete sense of how these characters define themselves, because it is not, and cannot be, something that is easily definable. If the male heroes of these films have the ability to redefine themselves, then the ways in which their narratives construct gender will be equally variable. Superheroes will inevitably have the ability to be both masculine and feminine, and any iteration thereof along the gender spectrum. As a result, the look of the spectator will find itself consistently shifting in return.

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