



THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AVENGERS: EXPLORATION OF WAR, GLOBALIZATION, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The economic and cultural impact of the four films forming the saga of The Avengers from 2012 to 2019 stands for the impressive accumulation of superhero fiction in the twenty-first century, with a remarkable resituation of the topic of war conflict into the popular imagination quite affected by the traumatic beginning of the era in the New York scenario on 9/11. This article intends to analyze the different plot elements in *The Avengers* (2012), *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015), *The Avengers. Infinity War* (2018), and *The Avengers. Endgame* (2019) to find clues to explain how the Marvel Cinematic Universe accomplishes a complex exploration of the nature of war, and how the films offer new ways of deconstructing simplistic Manichean polarization between good vs. evil. With this objective in mind, the study pays attention to how this deconstruction also needs to concentrate on the decomposition of stereotypes related to identity politics.

Keywords: globalization, superhero, masculinity, identity politics, Avengers, Marvel.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When Marvel launched *The Avengers* in 2012, followed by *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015), *The Avengers. Infinity War* (2018), and *The Avengers. Endgame* (2019), the company had a renowned tradition in the world of American superhero fiction, starting with comic books in the critical period of the 1960s and soon trespassing the two-dimension page to translate its superhero universe into films, TV series, and video games (Wiacek 2019, 18–19). The enterprise seemed an opportunity to cope with the historical times and to reflect the anxieties of a world turned into a complex and dangerous geopolitical network constantly deemed by the threat of war. As a fictionalization of the national anxieties generated by the attack on the World Trade Center Towers in September 2001, the superhero traditional landscape shifted from typical adventures about the defeat of evil creatures invading human civilization to a darker mood and more imperialistic versions of the individualistic American alter ego (Sterba 2015, 21).

On the day of the attacks, the President of the United States of America pronounced the speech that was going to condition the world's international politics. The speech

became a renewal of the old “manifest destiny” which established the American nation as the moral leader of the world in the first years of American national history. George W. Bush constructed an interpretation of the event as a lethal strike to the heart and the soul of the civilized world, asserting that the damaged soil of America actually stood for all the allies of democracy. Moreover, the conflict was soon related to an economic infrastructure that became a target of this war against Evil (with capital letters), and on October 7 Bush made clear the intimate connection between the territorial war and democratic idealism as an essential turn into the contemporary global economy and politics. The moral bias supporting the war on terror joined together the interests of social conservatism, military/industrial organizations, and the ideology of American global supremacy (Dolan 2004).

Given this historical context, it is easy to understand the boom in superhero films in the years after the attacks in terms of “a national wish-fulfilling fantasy of American resistance to foreign (and domestic) attacks” (Brown 2017, 90) while the nationalism of specific superheroes seems to negotiate and reconfigure their ideas about this resistance. Because of the malleability of these fictional characters, it was possible to explore in their plots ideas about war, power, and the consequences of war conflict (Hugley and Harrison 2014). Moreover, while Bush’s administration proclaimed the policy of preventive war and unilateralism as fundamental for the management of foreign affairs, the twenty-first-century superhero films develop strategies of resilience and resistance by inventing fantastic scenarios at constant war with aliens, gods, goddesses, witches, and modified humans, whose commitment with official politics is not completely fixed. In this state of affairs, the superheroes’ bravery turns into trespassing the principles of the leading forces of the State, normally situating their deeds in the limits of what is wrong and what is right.

The complexities of Marvel Multiverse, already created in comics as a mythical re-configuration of the history of our universe, provided the ideal metaphor to deal with the idea of the war of civilizations as stated by The Bush Doctrine and extended by the administration’s official spokesmen. One of them, writing his article on July 23, 2003, stated that “America does have *the* critical role to play in maintaining world order, both for its own interests and those of humanity” (Kegan 2003). As a war conflict, the doctrine proved the need to apply US military and political power to promote democracy in strategic areas, a phenomenon characterized diversely as national security liberalism, messianic universalism, or democratic realism (Monten 2005, 112).

The renewal of American exceptionalism became the *leitmotif* of the Marvel brand in the first years of the twenty-first century, which was inaugurated by the revival of the most nationalistic superheroes of the previous century. Before the release of *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012), the company had already produced five films which paved the way for the team’s saga. With *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier

2008), and with the sequel *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010), the brand saw the opportunity of resurrecting the other two figures that were to form part of the 2012 cast of the team, just one year before. The Asgardian Thor (Branagh 2011) and the archetypical soldier named Captain America (Johnston 2011) came back to the screen in two film narratives which can be considered a prequel to the 2012 experimental initiative.

The centrality of war as its main topic pervades the saga evolution, which, with the first mention of the Afghanistan war in *Iron Man*, confirmed the link with the new century political atmosphere critically inaugurated by the terrorist attacks in New York. Though it is evident that war and conflict have taken the central issue in most superheroes' stories, the specific fictionalization of the Afghanistan war becomes the proper context to develop Tony Stark's transformation into Iron Man. Moreover, the depiction of this bad-mannered and sarcastic man as the inheritor of the family company involved in weapon manufacturing constitutes the perfect subtext to construct the conventional double identity characterizing the superhero (Gibson, Huxley, and Ormrod 2015, 6). From the morally detached businessman who leads a profitable and amoral enterprise, he embraces the ethics of an altruistic superhero shifting his company's object into a high-quality technological enterprise to provide him with the superpower he does not primarily have. That the Stark Tower in New York becomes later on the settlement of The Avengers is just evidence of the formation of the team in terms of a profitable private corporation at the service of the State to preserve USA hegemony in the first place.

When studying the stories of the four films in a continuum, it is possible to find some ideas naturalizing the necessity of being alert about any invasion of alien ideologies that could destabilize the very core of American exceptionalism. Yet, throughout the evolution of the team within the period between 2012 and 2019 when Marvel released the last film of the saga, there is a clear interest in translating the conflict to a wider arena beyond the USA. This is so, not only because the target of the attacks is no more New York or any recognizable American scenario, but also because the enemy takes the nature of metaphysical evil, embodied by the Titan Thanos, who seeks to extermination of one half of all life in the universe. As it happens many times in Marvel Multiverse, this villain recreates a complex reconfiguration of the mythological Thanatos, who was represented in Greek culture as death incarnate, and who recovers here some theoretical tenets of 19th-century Malthusianism (Kragstbjerg 2021).

In this sense, the war conflict takes a multi-layered dimension that transforms the plots into a philosophical arena to confront ideological discourses about the future of human life and the most suitable political regimes for the planet's resistance. Across the Multiverse, life is a struggle constituted by personal survival and the impulse to dominate the environment, which is connected to Social Darwinism and to the need for extraordinary individuals that are fitter than the rest to fight extraordinary battles against evil. The very extraordinariness of these individuals locates the struggle beyond the human and,

in some sense, abandons humanity to the status of the weak and powerless so that the centrality of war and peace turns to be an issue separated from governments or human laws. These human social structures prove their impotence when facing the armies of evil so that the very concept of a world war conveys an existential conflict between the barbarian absolutist regimes and the democratic neoliberal organization represented by The Avengers.

2. THE AVENGERS: GEOPOLITICS, HETERONORMATIVITY, AND THE DIVERSIFICATION OF IDENTITY POLITICS

The formation of the team, explained deeply in the introductory sequences of the first film of the saga (Whedon 2012), makes it clear that they are not gathered naturally as a group working together, since they all have their background as individual superheroes in the Marvel Universe. As unique protagonists of their plots, all of them accomplish the main elements of traditional superheroes:

A heroic character with a selfless pro-social mission; with superpowers –extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generally distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic convention. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (Coogan 2006, 30)

In this sense, there is a pre-history for all of them displayed in several movies before 2012 within plots sharing the narrative elements of formation novels that explain the different processes in becoming superheroes, so that the first film does not need to go deeply into their individual stories. This is the reason why the group presents itself as an artificial and problematic gathering since they have to build unknown relationships among themselves by overcoming their self-assertiveness to negotiate and organize themselves as a working team. In assuming the historical moment of the world turned upside down with terrorist attacks, Marvel Cinematic Universe aligns with the Bush Doctrine which established the need for a global army for which no individual credo could work alone, the “unification of purpose” as the tool for success (Sterba 2015, 146). As a consequence, individualism should be set apart in the fictional universe “by considering character not just through that character’s subjectivity, but also in terms of their place in a larger world, where problems worthy of a superhero’s intervention require more than what any single person can do” (Acu 2016, 201).

The recruiting scenes are meant to establish a certain connection with the government organization S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division) as an international covert operations agency that could be read as a

fictional recreation of the CIA. On behalf of the agency, Nick Fury convinces the Executive Board to gather an army of superheroes for the world's defense to guarantee success in a war for which humans have no option to win. This element of the plot makes the superhero team be formed at the service of the (American) government in the same way that national armies are, by claiming a patriotic sense of justice that is not assumed to be individual but collective (Acu 2016, 196).

In this sense, the 2012 Avengers constitute a professional group that theoretically can provide the national government with an adequate planning strategy to fulfill the fundamental functions demanded by a conflict that is beyond human experience. The six members who finally accept the challenge distribute their special abilities depending on the fight strategy and meaningfully depending on the hierarchical distinctions between fully human (Black Widow and Hawkeye performing the role of infantry), mutant (Hulk as the brutal force derived from monstrous wrath), enhanced human (Iron Man and Captain America proving the capacity of technology and science to improve human power), and divine entity (Thor, the immortal Asgardian god). These power relations that inherently insert differential categories of being into the team produce also some cultural issues regarding hierarchies based on gender, birth origin, cultural context, and profession. In this sense, Marvel installs the hegemonic leadership in the enhanced humans without any questioning from the rest, surpassing the powerful Thor who adapts to Iron Man and Captain America's governance as the fittest to defend a world from which he is an alien. The other three are characterized by introducing an emotional network revolving around the female character, a Russian by birth and a trained spy, in the center of this triangle. By performing an unconventional *femme fatale*, she displays together with her killing expertise some feelings for Hawkeye and Hulk, whom she considers nearer than the other three. As a result, The Avengers' first appearance in the Marvel Cinematic Universe tends to portray social relations in a quite conventional way by concentrating the power of leadership and hegemony on the two characters that stand for strong, intelligent, and privileged masculinity, while presenting the mutant, the migrant and the humans as the weakest part. The feminized part of the team is identified with unstable feelings, lack of emotional control, and other aspects divorced from a sense of order, leadership, and scientific thinking.

This differentiating interest when depicting identity categories in terms of patriarchal and supremacist bases turns out to be also effective in reinforcing traditional social paradigms when analyzing the professions these six characters have when they do not act as superheroes. Hence, the hegemonic masculinity embodied by Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Steve Rogers (Captain America) provides the plot with the prominent role of the military-industrial complex, and of the extraordinary soldiers in war strategies. Consequent to this cultural hierarchy, the other side of the group stands for less exceptional professions: Clint Barton (Hawkeye) works as a S.H.I.E.L.D. official agent accepting

orders without any will of his own, Natasha Romanova works as a double agent for the American government and embodies the traditional role of a sexually-driven spy, Dr. Banner (Hulk) puts his scientific knowledge at the service of the poor with the objective of “doing no harm, staying free, and making amends” (Wiaceck 2019, 58), while Thor’s reign is far away in the Galaxy. Given this reinforcement of traditionally gendered characterization in *The Avengers* (2012), it is easy to align the particular gathering of identities in the film with Terence McSweeney’s statement about 21st-century superhero fiction in general:

The superhero film has been an emphatically heteronormative space with only rare and fleeting allusions to sexualities other than what is regarded as ‘the norm’ even though they are produced in an era and by a culture that is said to be more diverse than at any time in its history. (McSweeney 2020, 16)

Nevertheless, as Gibson, Huxley, and Ormrod claim in the introduction of *Superheroes and Identities* (2015), the very fluidity of characterization at the basis of superhero sagas allows the representation of identities constantly in motion and makes the protagonists gradually explore the categories they stand for. In broad terms, there is an interest in problematizing conventional traits and making them afresh using the complex organization of characters embodying different and extreme identities, which “deviates from more traditional portrayals of America under siege that might otherwise be understood as a community of innocents rising against the barbaric other” (Hugley and Harrison 2014, 120). This aspect paves the way to an exploration of war and peace much more interwoven with identity politics than the Manichean good vs. evil of the previous superhero films.

This is evident in the evolution of *The Avengers* from the first film released in 2012 and its last appearance in 2020. Regarding the team as unstable and increasing in number, it is possible to observe the addition of superheroes as a project for the inclusion of many sides in identity politics that is simultaneous with the growing perception of historical geopolitics in terms of the threat posed by fundamentalist Taliban regimes and Al Qaeda terrorism. The *Avengers* saga seems to be a rich-in-meaning set of stories where the globalization of war transforms itself into a project of inclusion in the manner established by Bush Doctrine as “a foreign policy nationalism that regards the United States as an instrument of democratic change in the international system” (Monten 2005, 114). This is enriched by the MCU strategy of envisioning the potential of female superheroes interacting with their male counterparts, and by plots that encourage the intersection of non-American “racialized” or “marginalized” armies to work beside the original team.

The first scenes of *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015) established a connection with the 2012 film, by returning to the so-called Battle of New York as a recent past which is seen as just one phase in a wider conflict constantly threatening the Earth. This battle which closed the first film of the saga conceived the defeat of Loki, Thor’s evil brother,

and the Chitauri army in terms of an existential fight with the unknown enemies coming from beyond the planet. This second film now sets up the story in the fictional city of Eastern Europe Sokovia, which has been invaded by a well-known enemy inhabiting the Marvel Cinematic Universe called HYDRA, with the Nazi Warrior Baron Von Strucker as its commander. The birth of this organization as an alternative brand of Hitler's regime in 1943 is a detail that lurks throughout previous stories with the objective of identifying HYDRA with chaos, extermination, and cruelty. The film starts in *media res* introducing the nature of the conflict by means of brief dialogues among the six-member team consolidated at the end of *The Avengers* (2012).

The most important feature of this sequel is the expansion of the war towards areas of the planet which were conventionally divorced from superhero narratives. Selecting the East of Europe as a setting for any kind of political tension habitually introduces the idea of totalitarianism and/or primitivism in the plots of action films, and here this is a clue to interpreting the role of The Avengers in saving the city. Feeling like foreigners to the place as the agents of HYDRA, the six characters are allowed to have some time together outside the action sequences in order to include some conversations about their function as an army. In distributing the sequences in the film by the alternation of fighting and of thinking about the consequences of the fight, the script permits the characters to perform a critical position about the war as a political strategy, something that marks the moral message that Marvel selects for this film. Now that the group works together without the political framework of SHIELD, they are free from the mandates of the institution and they feel the need of justifying their deeds before the others, something that provokes problems among them and enables the plot to naturalize the instability of the project created by Nick Fury. Recreating the traditional heroes' necessity of situating themselves on the edge of the Law, all the members of the team produce a critical moral stance, since they normally are outside "both the legal and ethical norms that govern others" (Haglye and Harrison 2014, 121). However, this is nothing else than Marvel's strategy for adding or resting characters to the group, inserting the idea of The Avengers as an abstract concept truly connected with a "real" army, with its hierarchies and its missions but without the bureaucracies of any executive board from the State. With this turn of the screw, the Marvel Cinematic Universe transforms the saga into a fictionalization of the war as a phenomenon culturally linked to the idea of neoliberalism and democracy as the basic ideological supporters of war conflicts by constructing a geopolitical mission for the contemporary world (Hassler-Forest 2012).

As a matter of fact, *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015) and *The Avengers. Infinity War* (2018) both are meant to establish the ongoing conflict between the translation of leadership from one superhero to another and the problematic management of a team in constant change, something that provokes the temporal retirement of such relevant figures as Thor, Iron Man, and Hulk, and the recruitment of some others as War Machine,

Falcon, Dr. Strange and the Scarlet Witch as full members of The Avengers. What is interesting enough is that with this changing structure of characterization, Marvel is able to extend the nature of the members' abilities and functions to be successfully facing each new conflict. This is why, from the materialistic version of the original team guided by technology, science, and soldiers, the new gatherings more and more introduce certain mysticism and mental capacities to enrich The Avengers' powers against the multifaceted war planned by the global enemy Thanos, the god of Death. Significantly, the complexity of an army such as the one that gathers for the third film of the saga affects the complicated set of identity categories which at first was rather conventional in terms of American masculinity and national exceptionalism. From now on, these abstract ideas are widened and the films start incorporating new forms of characterization which activate certain traces of female empowerment and self-assertion as well as generate new multidimensional forms of performing masculinities on both sides of the battle.

3. FROM THE BATTLE OF NEW YORK TO THE INFINITE WAR: THE DIVERSIFICATION OF MASCULINITIES FOR A GLOBAL ARMY

That war as a cultural concept is intimately connected with the main traits of hegemonic masculinity and its association with national power and national prowess provides a clue for the interpretation of superhero fiction under the light of 21st-century international politics. The inherent strategy of using traits of powerful masculine energy to build the foundation of some social institutions such as national security agencies and militarization is the object of Sandra E. Via in her contribution "Gender, Militarism, and Globalization: Soldiers for Hire and Hegemonic Masculinity":

Militaristic behavior is a path by which men and masculine states can prove their masculinity. Idealized masculinities for soldiers throughout history have included characteristics associated with aggression, bravery, courage, service, precision, and protection. Idealized militarized masculinities are social, but they are also physical, where militaries emphasize the soldier's physical strength, particularly upper body strength, by means of training exercises and certain areas of specialization within militaries. (Via 2010, 44)

The iconic figure of the superhero clearly embodies this idea since the basic narratives he inhabits take conventionally the war as their *leitmotif*. (Parson and Schatz 2020, 2–6) Moreover, the formation of the character as a superhero is normally narrated by creating stories about their childhood and adolescence to produce plausible plots of individual transformation and metamorphosis that concentrate on bodily issues, such as genetic experimentations, forceful physical training, or technological enhancement. When this fundamental feature of the cultural icon is interpreted with the object of finding links with national identities there seems evident that the American superhero serves to the fictionalization of ideas about US foreign and domestic politics, being normally a huge success when the historical moment is characterized by war mobilization.

As seen in previous sections, The Avengers saga presents a quite complex use of superheroes, and, in the range of years passed from the first film to the last, the idea of a world conflict attacking the very core of American exceptionalism keeps taking the center of the plots with the objective of exploring the concept of a global war and the need of a successful army that can face it. In this sense, the Marvel Cinematic Universe counteracts as a critical response against simplistic views of the superhero as an unproblematic emblem of American nationalism. Moreover, in the evolution of the superhero's army, the company introduces some important issues as the difficulties of managing individual egos working for the same mission, and the complications of claiming unity for a global army when it conveys the abandonment of some autonomous strategies and beliefs. Not even the enemies invading the Earth point without a doubt to the traditional enemy with no psychological depth, nor is there an inevitability of male supremacist hegemony among the different communities in the armies.

In this sense, *The Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) represents the most challenging recreation of these ideas about the complexity of recruiting a global united army with the mission of defeating the totalitarian Thanos and his unbeatable monstrous militia. The essence of war as a social construction of humanity responding to a specific threat embodies in The Avengers saga, as in all superhero fiction, an exploration of contemporary anxieties about insecurity and panic of losing the ground of a welfare social status (Sterba 2012). With this in mind, studying the enemies' characterization and motives is a perfect strategy to envision the evolution of these anxieties along with the historical moments in which the different films belonging to the saga were released. That Marvel had planned the four films to compose such an idea brings about an interpretation that it can only be reaching complex results if all of them are analyzed as a network of plots working together. If this is so, then the spectator learns that all threats coming from outer space from the Battle of New York to the Infinite War fit into a total plan organized by Thanos in his mad mission to exterminate half of the life of the universe for the sake of environmental sustainability. This political ideology, which would be appraisable in some other circumstances, is here associated with the Malthusian claims of some problematic control of birth and population traditionally linked to totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, the very strategy posed by Thanos actually implies the extermination of human beings, with no filming devoted to other planets' devastation (Kragstjerg 2021, 25). Thanos' status as a divine entity with no care about the Earth's natural environment proves his theory's failures as a proper interpretation of the world's overpopulation and positions his ideology radically against the neoliberal theory of individual freedom so basic for the American way of life.

This is the first absolutist statement pronounced by Loki, the first of a series of villains commanded by Thanos in *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012): his speech before the Battle of New York starts expresses the failure of human freedom as actually a sophisticated

form of prison and the felicity of turning submissive without the need of managing individual projects for the future. With the evolution of plots throughout the saga the spectator will learn that Loki is just as submissive to Thanos' plans as he intends to reject in this first speech, being precisely a male character that is normally trying to avoid his own deficient inheritance as Odin's adopted child. The critical masculinity which he embodies seems to participate in a process of destabilizing male power in the villains' characterization proposed by the Marvel Cinematic Universe from the beginning, which is not aligned with any process of masculinization on the part of The Avengers. The final battle with Loki's summoning the Chitauri army to reach New York by opening a fantastic hole in the sky becomes "an opportunity to rewrite 9/11" (Brown 2017, 75) for a revenge fantasy where superheroes are able to stop and defeat the overwhelming majority of attackers. This is possible because of the performance of national pride executed by the previously sarcastic and selfish Iron Man, who can cross the hole and take a lethal missile out from the planet. In this framework, the representative of the American military/industrial complex finally ends the work using precisely his flamboyant and sophisticated golden armor to be able to do it.

Tony Stark as Iron Man, as well as Steve Rogers as Captain American, stands for a certain reconfiguration of the hegemonic masculinity inherent in the military realm as mentioned at the beginning of this section. Both comply with many of the codes constructing this form of masculinity, but they express some traits of gender-crossing by assuming some emotional drives in their personalities, which divorced them from the perfect soldier.

This is too evident in the second film, where the war is presented in two phases, dealing with two important explorations about the exercise of war. The first one with HYDRA and Baron Von Strucker threatening the Sokovian population is used to insert a new humanitarian view on The Avengers' part to give way to the sequences in which they are more preoccupied with the inhabitants' salvation than with the enemies' defeat, assuring themselves about their moral mission that differentiates their identity from the monstrous enemy's. Masculinity is here at the center of this debate since the female protagonists, Black Widow, and Scarlet Witch are at first sight encapsulated in the traditional roles of carers and family relatives protecting their male counterparts. In the second phase within this plot, after a celebration of the victory in Sokovia, the team is again threatened by a new enemy, Ultron, an enemy originated by the failing experiments done by Tony Stark and Dr. Banner, that simultaneously represents another phase in the global war, one associated with the attack of a device using artificial intelligence to delete all data from The Avengers facility. Here it is possible to see that anxieties derived from the evil consequences of technology, a masculine realm in the films, do not come from the outer world, since Ultron is a machine resulting from Stark's and Banner's experiments which becomes the very enemy of the team and the world's life. In Muñoz-

González's words: "The characters have become more self-conscious of their roles, even questioning the 'greater good' that they are trying to achieve" (2017, 66). Again the too-domesticated ego of the military/industrial complex advocate provokes the threat and inserts in the plot the negative consequences of human technological improvements, creating another collision for the rest of the group, for whom unity should be accepted as the unique value to be successful. Being the most crucial moment for the future of the team, the final sequences of the film not only record Ultron's defeat but also the dissolution of The Avengers as primarily formed in 2012. Nevertheless, the film narrative generates some new expectations about the future of the protagonists by creating a new exceptional figure with the name of Vision, "a man-made hero with a hardwired desire to defend the helpless and cursed with a hunger to be human" (Wiacek 2019, 150), the superhero assembling high-technological improvements and human goodness, in a sense, a positive reformulation of hegemonic masculinity. Vision, with his abhorrence of war and his desire to have a human body, finally builds an emotional tie with Wanda Maximoff, an enhanced female human born in the Balkans and the perpetrator of chaos when she is transformed into the Scarlet Witch. Together, as New Avengers, form at the end of the film the couple that distorts the patriarchal axis of the first team.

Four years after the release of *The Avengers. Age of Ultron*, Marvel continued the saga with *The Avengers. Infinity War* (Russo and Russo 2018), and had planned the strategy to gather The Avengers again by means of complicating the leading roles with the entrance of different armies to compensate for the team's difficulties. This is why the Marvel Cinematic Universe puts into motion several pre-existent groups of superheroes, which have almost nothing in common with The Avengers but can gather together against Thanos' ultimate menace. The infinity war actually refers to the central place of the Infinity Gems in the universe welfare, some precious stones with essential powers embodying concepts such as Reality, Space, Time, Soul, and Mind. Nevertheless, it is possible to interpret this conflict as a war that is beyond time and space, a fight for the very values of humanity and the world, which are at the point of being lost in Thanos' hands.

Evolving logically towards a representation of the problem as involving all the galaxy, the film extends the settings to incorporate some faraway planets with the intention of providing the plot with some allegorical interpretations, as well as of distributing the different teams' functions in a multiplied mission of recovery. The collaborative work again starts with the process of new recruitment when Dr. Strange convinces Tony Stark in New York to rejoin The Avengers again by showing him the dangers posed by Thanos and his objective of gathering the infinity gems. In an involuntary way, Iron Man gets to incorporate Spiderman into the group, to whom there is the addition of Captain American, Hulk, War Machine, Falcon, Vision, Black Widow, and the Scarlet Witch. Yet this new reconfiguration of The Avengers seems to be insufficient, and the film now

introduces a new component: a heterogeneous team that is proud of their identities as intergalactic outlaws, and a set of extraordinary individuals that lack any political commitment to war. This group, called The Guardians of the Galaxy, is evidence of the Marvel corporation's need to adapt the plot to non-heteronormative times, something that is achieved by the entrance of animals, plants, alien women, and other figures to introduce diversity in the more-standardized identity politics explored before this film. The Guardians display the gathering of six members who stand for different categories going through a process of recognition and understanding, complying with the idea of unity as the model of an army set in previous films. The leader is the modified animal called Rocket Raccoon, whose principal goal in life is to get rich and protect his friends from any harm. He governs a spaceship with the other five members of the crew, pursuing the common objective of killing Thanos, each of them for different reasons. Actually, they do not fulfill the role of superheroes in the traditional way, but the plot development draws from them their ethics and they finally are committed to the general mission.

As the last complement of these two teams, the film seeks the implementation of some postcolonial ideas by making the African fictional setting of Wakanda have an important role in forming this global army. Ruled by Black Panther, the African superhero previously developed as the protagonist of the homonymous film released just a few months before *The Avengers: Infinity War*, Wakanda stands for African identity and their will of being divorced from the external world, something they achieved by building a defense shield that keeps them safe. Their power comes from the control of Vibranium and the unique computer technology they use to defend themselves from the rest of the world.

The process of globalizing the war conflict against the Almighty Thanos not only conveys the formation of this complex unity coming from diverse armies but also provides the film with a multiplicity of second characters that join the military force in order to find solutions for some structural problems, together with strange settings which expand the idea of a convoluted universe. This is the case of the Dwarf in Nivadellir, a planet devoted to forging iron weapons, who is in charge of creating a new hatch for Thor, or The Collector in Knowhere, a planet formed with the head of an antique divine entity holding the knowledge of the Galaxy, where the Reality Gem is kept, or Vormir, a barren planet where Thanos sacrifices his stepdaughter Gamora to get the Soul Gem.

With this complicated representation of the war, the characters, and the universe's nature, the mission of the Earth's global army is transformed into an existential phenomenon where the Galaxy is no more guided by any logical thinking, with the consequent impotence felt by the earthly power displayed by all of them. The mystic sciences dominated by Dr. Strange in his training in Tibet do not harm Thanos since he is from the beginning captured and disabled, so that the world is finally defeated and half exterminated when Thanos gets the six stones and puts them on his gauntlet. With an extremely

unconventional ending, the film seems to finish with the Earth's defeat, an aspect of the plot which seems to correspond with the failures of putting an end to wars in the American foreign politics scenario.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Avengers. Endgame, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo and released in 2019, seems to be an alternative (happy) ending to the three previous films in the saga. By using the science fiction topic of the time machine, the remaining set of characters that survived after Thanos' extermination at the end of *The Avengers. Infinite War* gets to build a sophisticated device to go back in time and recover the Infinite Gems to prevent Thanos' victory. In this process that distributes once more the superheroes into small teams to travel to several years of the past, there is one of them reaching 1970 after having no good results in 2012 with the recovery of the Space Gems. Throughout some intricacies of the plot, Tony Stark and Steve Rogers place themselves in the very historical time when Tony's father was experimenting with some subatomic particles to create supersoldiers in the line of Steve Rogers some years before.

The strategy of coming back to where it all began in order to change the future is a traditional manner of solving conflictive problems in fantasy, but here the historical setting is much more than a disengaged fictional place, since with this turn of the screw the whole saga provides an innovative interpretation about the source of the war that has become eternal. The fact that the facilities where Tony Stark's father and other scientists work are actually the site for SHIELD to secretly operate with dangerous experiments produces an enriching development of what the saga explored from the beginning: the hidden implications of America in the wars coming after the 1970s, and the negative consequences of experimenting with humanity and with human existential and spiritual values.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe's project when activating *The Avengers* plots has resulted in tremendous global success and has situated the company as the most profitable and most famous factory of superhero fiction in the contemporary world. Yet, this is not its only success: The four films of *The Avengers* together with the films that compose the universe in which they live have proven that even within the strict framework of superhero fiction there is the possibility of introducing alternative ideas about diversity and about the dangers of war.

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