

Déjà New in Joss Whedon's *Marvel's The Avengers*

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Fredric Jameson suggests in his essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*, that the near ubiquity of 'the nostalgia mode' employed in the production of popular culture is indicative of contemporary society's inability to cope with time and history. The current cultural context is characterised by an unrelenting onslaught of post-industrial practices. These include, naming but a few, the penetration of media and advertising, rapid cycles of consumption, the decentralising effects of urbanisation and technological advancements in transport. According to Jameson, these disorienting and inexorable practices have since produced a series of 'perpetual presents' that enforce historical amnesia. The postmodern subject is unable to adequately represent the present and takes refuge in the production of cultural products in 'the nostalgia mode'. Suffering the trauma of a loss of history, contemporary society thus experiences both personal and collective anxiety.

Marvel's The Avengers may be read as a form of therapeutic intervention by attempting to contain this traumatic loss of time and history. To this end, the film provides multiple sites of identification for the viewing subject. The narrative of *The Avengers* involves an assembly of superheroes thrust into a contemporary setting, each symbolising a surviving fragment of a lost cultural past.

This article develops on the ideas presented by the author at the 7th Annual Limina Conference, 'Humanising Collaboration', held at the University of Western Australia in June 2012. It analyses the recently released film by Marvel Studios, *Marvel's The Avengers*, in response to the call for papers discussing connections between History and Culture. The discussion that follows suggests that while the superheroic collaboration presents a pastiche that promises to amalgamate fragments of history into a coherent whole, *Marvel's The Avengers* ultimately denies the sustained fulfilment of this fantasy of return. Instead, it is argued here that in its portrayal of the team's conflictual dynamics and the collateral damage caused by the superheroic collaboration, the film ironically performs nostalgia's palliative function through the innovative subversion of 'the nostalgia mode'.

Introduction

*Marvel's The Avengers*¹ is a Hollywood film directed by Joss Whedon, and inspired by the Marvel Comics series of the same name created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Since its release in cinemas in April 2012, the film has been ranked third in the 'All Time Box Office: Worldwide Grosses' list published by *Box Office Mojo*, a leading online box office reporting service.² The film is the culmination of an ambitious six-film project by Marvel Studios begun in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*³ and *The Incredible Hulk*⁴, followed by *Iron Man 2*⁵ in 2010, and finally, *Thor*⁶ and *Captain*

¹*Marvel's The Avengers*, (dir. Joss Whedon, prod. Kevin Feige; Marvel Studios), USA, April 2012. *Marvel Avengers Assemble* by the British Board of Film Classification and the Irish Classification Office. *The Avengers* hereinafter.

²Information courtesy of *Box Office Mojo*, last updated 28 October 2012, an *Internet Movie database* (IMDb) company, Burbank, California, viewed 1 October 2012, <<http://boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>>. Used with permission.

³*Iron Man*, (dir. Jon Favreau, prod. Avi Arad & Kevin Feige; Marvel Studios), USA, May 2008.

⁴*The Incredible Hulk*, (dir. Louis Leterrier, prod. Avi Arad, Gale Anne Hurd & Kevin Feige; Marvel Studios), USA, June 2008.

*America*⁷ in 2011. *The Avengers* is an undoubtedly postmodern pastiche, rife with complex, entropic turns and interconnected plot elements from the discrete narratives of its five preceding films. This article focuses on the collaboration of the superheroes and discusses the way in which Fredric Jameson's 'nostalgia mode' is employed – and possibly subverted – in *The Avengers*. The recent filmic portrayals of the postmodern superhero will first be considered, and an analysis of the film's fragmentary form and *The Avengers*' investment in 'postmemory' will follow. Next, the argument focuses on the conflictual dynamics between two superheroes with the aim of analysing the effects of their collaboration. In conclusion, the film will be read as an attempt to contain the traumatic loss of time and history suffered by the postmodern subject, as observed by Jameson. Though an extensive analysis is beyond the scope of this article, the importance of the traditional hero as put forward by Joseph Campbell and Umberto Eco should first be outlined in contrast to the postmodern superhero.

The Superhero in the Postmodern Context and Historical Amnesia

The mythological heroic figure has long performed a fundamental role in formulating, revitalising and even affirming cultural mores, beliefs and identities, across societies and throughout history. The hero's narrative and societal function has been thoroughly investigated by Joseph Campbell in his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.⁸ In introducing the hero, Campbell asserts that '[t]he hero is the man of self-achieved submission' whose 'primary virtue and historic deed' is precisely to discover what this submission entails.⁹ He suggests that

[t]he hero ... has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. ... The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man-perfected, unspecific, universal man-he has been reborn.¹⁰

Following this heroic rebirth, Campbell notes, the hero 'return[s] to us, transfigured, and teach[es] the lesson he has learned of life renewed'.¹¹ Campbell's analysis of the hero and his adventure through three distinct stages – Departure, Initiation and Return – elucidates the important relationship between the psychological needs of society and the trials the hero must overcome. These mythic trials, Campbell posits, exist to 'carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back'.¹² In other words, the subject in identification with the mythic hero is effectively aided 'across those difficult thresholds of transformation' in periods of extreme anxiety. The heroic protagonist thus serves as an ego-ideal, that is, what the ego holds as an image to which it aspires.

In 'The Myth of Superman', Umberto Eco draws on Campbell's assertions about the importance of the heroic figure. Eco notes that amidst the uncertainties and dehumanising effects of an increasingly industrialised society, the psychological

⁵*Iron Man 2*, (dir. Jon Favreau, prod. Kevin Feige; Marvel Studios), USA, 2010.

⁶*Thor*, (dir. Kenneth Branagh, prod. Kevin Feige; Marvel Studios), Australia, April 2011.

⁷*Captain America: The First Avenger*, (dir. Joe Johnston, prod. Kevin Feige; Marvel Studios), USA, July 2011.

⁸J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), 2nd ed., Bollingen Series vol. 7, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1968.

⁹*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.16.

¹⁰*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp.19-20.

¹¹*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.20.

¹²*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.11.

demands of the subject were fulfilled in the figure of the superhero of late capitalism. Here was the modern ego-ideal: as Clark Kent, he is 'kind, handsome, modest and helpful';¹³ but as Superman, he is a superhero with Herculean strength, moral certitude, X-ray and panoramic vision. In *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, Scott Bukatman rightly states that 'Superman seems to be an incarnation of [Le] Corbusier's panoramic authority based on perfect transparency, control, and knowledge'.¹⁴ This provided a psychological curative to the 'perpetual state of instability, insecurity, fatigue and accumulating delusions of the urban landscape'.¹⁵ Arriving with a prefigured destiny as protector of Earth, Superman has an omniscient access to his past and future, evocative of his fullness of being. In other words, Superman and other traditional superheroes effectively facilitated the subject's engagement in a fantasy of 'being whole'.¹⁶

However, in recent years, P. David Marshall observes that there is a tendency 'for elements to disperse and to not maintain ... structure and order'¹⁷ within the postmodern context. Postmodernist Fredric Jameson also writes of these effects in 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society'.¹⁸ He argues that the current interconnected and hypermediated, postmodern context produces 'a series of perpetual presents' that enforce an historical amnesia. Due to a seeming inability to represent current experience, Jameson thus identifies the need to engage with a fantasy of return to a yearned-for past believed to be more pleasant than what the contemporary moment offers.¹⁹ He dubs the 'nostalgia mode' as a response to this loss of temporal and historical signifiers.²⁰ The profusion and unprecedented popularity of superheroes on the silver screen might then be said, as they have in previous periods of uncertainty and upheavals, to have aided the cultural imagination as a means of coping with the trauma engendered by postmodern temporal and spatial dislocation.

Contrary to Eco's description of a wholesome Superman who is able to re-establish order within the runtime of a film,²¹ however, recent filmic incarnations of the superheroic figure bear an uncanny resemblance to the disempowered subject.²² Instead of embodying a fullness of being, the postmodern superhero is struggling for control and riddled with internal fragmentation. This internal struggle is vividly portrayed in the Banner/Hulk character, who harbours a deep fear of the monster within him; he thus constrains himself to a limited range of emotional expression and human interaction.²³ The postmodern superhero as depicted in the Stark/Iron Man character presents yet another departure from the traditional portrayal of the omnipotent superhero previously observed by Eco, and later described by Bukatman

¹³U. Eco, 'The Myth of Superman', trans. N. Chilton, *Diacritics*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1972, p.14.

¹⁴S. Bukatman, 'The Boys in the Hood: A Song of the Urban Superhero', in S. Bukatman (ed.), *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*, Duke University Press, USA & London, 2003, p.198.

¹⁵'The Boys in the Hood'.

¹⁶J. Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. B. Fink, W.W. Norton & Company, New York & London, 1966, p.581.

¹⁷Cited in K. Fuery, 'The Issues of Interactivity' in *New Media: Culture and Image*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, p.35.

¹⁸F. Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*, Verso, London, 1998, pp.1-12.

¹⁹Postmodernism', p.11.

²⁰Postmodernism', pp.4-5 & 7-8.

²¹Myth of Superman', pp.17-19.

²²J. Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the "I" as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Écrits*, pp.75-81.

²³*The Incredible Hulk & The Avengers*.

as embodying the all-knowing, Corbusierian ideal.²⁴ Far from being a worthy representative and enforcer of the Law empowered to implement measures of control in the community,²⁵ Tony Stark is irreverent, often publicly flouting the law to his own ends. Furthermore, the childish and pugnacious Stark makes no effort to be the Everyman equivalent of Clark Kent, and is unable to maintain adult relationships.²⁶ These contrasting filmic portrayals of the superhero are indicative of a paradigmatic shift in the meaning of heroism in the cultural consciousness, and possibly affirm the lived cultural realities of the postmodern context. Often struggling with incomplete origin narratives and ambivalent destinies, the superhero now makes available a profoundly human site of identification for the postmodern subject. This superhero – the postmodern ego-ideal – is unmasked, vulnerable, and searching for signification.

Campbell's 'man of self-achieved submission' traverses the threshold²⁷ 'out of the land we know into darkness',²⁸ and remains insulated upon his return so that he might revivify the community with the boon of his adventure.²⁹ As Tom Morris and Matt Morris report in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way*, however, the 'ultraconservative, Big Blue Boy Scout' no longer engages 'the Gen-X and the Gen-Next audience'.³⁰ That is to say, the Campbellian hero, alienated from the very community he protects, is no longer sufficient. Arguably, where the earlier superheroic configuration fails in meeting the psychical demands of the subject, the postmodern superhero succeeds. This is achieved in the postmodern superhero's desire for signification, conveyed in the six films of the Avengers project, like *Thor* and *Captain America*. Thor, for example, is deemed unfit to assume the Asgardian throne due to his unparalleled narcissism. Having disrupted the peace between Asgard and the Frost Giants, he is banished to Earth from Asgard by Odin All-Father. Mjöllnir, Thor's hammer and source of power, is lost to him and he is consequently rendered powerless. His ungainliness is comic in its portrayal and he is summarily tasered, restrained, sedated and run over by a Jeep as he struggles to gain his bearings. He neither has full knowledge of his journey nor adequate superheroic faculties until he is interpellated by Erik Selvig, Jane Foster and his Asgardian entourage. As they grant his desire for signification through the provision and receipt of affection despite his helplessness, Thor abandons his narcissistic love affair with himself and reprises his superheroic role, seemingly transfigured.³¹ Similarly, in *Captain America*, Steve Rogers desperately travels to different recruitment centres hoping for a military consignment in the Second World War. Eager to be acknowledged for his courage in preference to being dismissed for his weakened physique, Rogers is rewarded when he is chemically and physically enhanced. Tellingly, despite this, he does not undergo a superheroic transfiguration until he is interpellated by a community of fellow soldiers, and loved by Sharon Carter, for whom he sacrifices his life.³²

These catalytic effects of intersubjective interpellation may be explained using the model formulated by Richard B. Ulman and Doris Brothers in *The Shattered Self*:

²⁴'The Myth of Superman', p.14; & 'The Boys in the Hood', p.198.

²⁵J. Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits*, p.229; & 'Myth of Superman', p.14.

²⁶*Iron Man, Iron Man 2 & The Avengers*.

²⁷*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.77.

²⁸*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.217.

²⁹*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp.224-228.

³⁰T. Morris & M. Morris (eds), 'Introduction', *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way*, Open Court Publishing Company, USA, 2005, p.5.

³¹*Thor*.

³²*Captain America*.

A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma.³³ Ulman and Brothers contend that trauma is caused when the 'central organising fantasies of self in relation to selfobject' is disrupted,³⁴ where 'selfobject' is defined by Heinz Kohut as that person who is 'subjectively connected to and extended from self'.³⁵ This selfobject enables the formation of a cohesive subjectivity through admiration, praise and valuation.³⁶ Perhaps then, as suggested in *The Avengers*, the most important index of heroism in contemporary filmic figurations of superheroes is the yearning for and attainment of subjecthood *within* a community, through sustained, intersubjective interpellation.

Introduction to *Marvel's The Avengers*

The five preceding films have invested in the individual development and origin narratives of the respective titular protagonists in their superheroic transfigurations. These individual filmic plot trajectories converge in the latest instalment of the Avengers project. The film opens on Loki, soon after his self-imposed exile from Asgard at the conclusion of *Thor*. A new character in the saga is introduced in this opening scene. He is merely The Other, portrayed as a montage of fragmented close-ups complemented by a sinister, disembodied voice. The Other promises to provide Loki with the Chitauri forces needed to subjugate Earth in exchange for The Tesseract, a source of energy that may be harnessed to power intergalactic travel. Following Loki's attack on a S.H.I.E.L.D.³⁷ testing facility and his theft of The Tesseract, the superheroes are 'assembled' by Director Nick Fury to respond to the villain's declaration of war:

LOKI: I am Loki of Asgard and I am burdened with glorious purpose ... I come with glad tidings of a world made free.
FURY: Free from what?
LOKI: Freedom. Freedom is life's great lie. Once you accept that in your heart, you will know peace.
FURY: Yeah, you say peace. I kind of think you mean the other thing.

Though their collaboration to avert 'an extinction level' invasion of Earth by the Chitauri is called upon, it is the dissonance and discord arising between the superheroes that drives the plot of *The Avengers*. Their contentious dynamic is first alluded to in each of the superheroes' entry into the filmic narrative. They are recruited in sequential opening scenes, from far-ranging and contrasting settings in which they perform disparate superheroic roles.

Clint Barton is introduced at the S.H.I.E.L.D. testing facility, keeping watch over the operations. He is otherwise known as Hawkeye, a government agent wielding a bow and arrow. Barton has few lines in the narrative, and is characterised by his helicopter perspective and keen reflexes. Natasha Romanoff, also known as The Black Widow, is first seen in a gritty building still under construction in Russia. Here, using unconventional tactics, Romanoff interrogates three men whom she later

³³R. Ulman & D. Brothers, *The Shattered Self: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma*, Analytic Press, Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1988.

³⁴*Shattered Self*, p.2.

³⁵A.M. Siegel, *Heinz Kohut and the Psychology of the Self*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p.71.

³⁶Heinz Kohut, p.71.

³⁷Acronym refers to Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. 'End credits', *Iron Man*, 2008.

easily and innovatively disposes of when she receives her call to action. Bruce Banner, or The Hulk, is then introduced in his role as a physician attending to the poor in a bustling Indian city. His unbridled and threatening persona, The Hulk, is effectively suggested by Natasha's nervous fear of him in an abandoned shack where she has lured him from the city centre. In this sequence, the Banner/Hulk character's internal division is emphasised in the distinct contrast shown between his almost timid initial interaction and his sudden, explosive outburst. Next, Steve Rogers – acknowledged as 'the world's first superhero,'³⁸ Captain America – is pictured in isolated frustration, punching a sandbag in a boxing gym. His introduction to *The Avengers* is cut with historical scenes of battle and love lost during the Second World War. Rogers' lonesome portrayal highlights his struggle to find his role in a world he no longer recognises or understands.³⁹ The notorious Tony Stark, that is, Iron Man, is introduced as having somewhat overcome the internal struggles posed during the preceding films, *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*. Instead of building weapons of mass destruction, in *The Avengers*, Stark experiments with 'sustainable, clean energy' and resides in Midtown Manhattan. No longer the untethered playboy of the first two films, he is in what appears to be a stable relationship with his assistant, Pepper Potts. Stark remains, however, 'volatile, self-obsessed', and 'do[es]n't play well with others'.⁴⁰ The final addition to the Avengers is Thor who hails from Asgard in another galaxy. He visits Earth on a mission to retrieve The Tesseract and his adoptive brother and nemesis, Loki. Though he is not recruited by S.H.I.E.L.D., he joins the Avengers in their quest to save Earth, as its self-declared protector.⁴¹ Worshipped as the Norse god of thunder and lightning, Thor overcame his narcissism in his superheroic journey presented in the film, *Thor*, and is possibly figured in *The Avengers* in contrast to Stark's character. Together, the superheroes' base of operations is the Helicarrier, a S.H.I.E.L.D. aircraft with a cloaking mechanism, hovering above New York City.

At the filmic climax, the superheroes rally together against the hybrid Chitauri army in a massive battle on the streets of Manhattan. Acknowledging their differences and, indeed, using them to their strategic advantage, each of the superheroes undergoes yet another transformation as a result of membership in the Avengers team. At the conclusion of the narrative, the team disbands, each returning to their individual roles. Though Fury seems assured of their return, the concluding sequence is formulaic of the ambiguous conclusion – resisting resolution if at all – of the postmodern superhero narrative. In the ensuing discussion, I argue that this postmodern ambiguity is further evidenced by the epilogues that follow all of the six films in the Avengers project.

Fragmentary and Fragmented Form: Cycles of Loss and Return

The fragmentary narrative of *The Avengers* is a distinctly postmodern form. In his introduction to *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard writes:

³⁸Agent Coulson in *The Avengers*.

³⁹Rogers' temporal and spatial dislocation was portrayed at the conclusion of *Captain America*, when he awakes from stasis and stumbles, disoriented, in Times Square, Manhattan.

⁴⁰Stark, in *The Avengers*, reading his psychological evaluation for his suitability for The Avengers Initiative proposed in the epilogue of *Iron Man 2*.

⁴¹*Thor*.

The narrative function ... is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements. ... There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements.⁴²

I contend that as six individually contained, yet interconnected narratives, the epilogues in *The Avengers* project present what Lyotard describes as ‘a heterogeneity of elements’.⁴³ The Avengers Initiative, a force proposed by Nick Fury to the leaders of S.H.I.E.L.D., was first alluded to in the epilogue of *Iron Man*, and subsequently woven through the epilogues of *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, and finally, *Captain America*. Each of these films is concerned with narrating individual superheroic journeys, but nonetheless self-consciously asserts itself as part of a larger project, namely, *The Avengers*. The epilogues are separate from the main narratives, existing in the interstices between films. Furthermore, each film is set against a different historical backdrop, and the epilogues refer to elements of films that both precede them and will follow. In this way too, *The Avengers* is structurally cyclical and non-linear in progression, a distinct product of the postmodern moment.⁴⁴

In *Thor*’s epilogue, for example, Nick Fury presents the Tesseract of Asgard to Erik Selvig.⁴⁵ However, this artefact will only be obtained by Henry Stark, Tony Stark’s father, at the conclusion of the subsequently produced *Captain America* film. In yet another anachronistic turn, *Captain America* is set in The Second World War during Henry Stark’s research and development of Rogers’ physical augmentation. This lends a retrospective link to the Arc Reactor that powers Tony Stark’s wounded body in *Iron Man*, which was discovered in *Iron Man 2* as a product of his father’s research, and only newly revealed in *Captain America*. Moving both retrospectively and prospectively yet again, General Thaddeus Ross first appears in conversation with Tony Stark in the epilogue of *The Incredible Hulk*. In *Captain America*, he is revealed as having worked with Henry Stark on the Super Soldier experiment in the years of the Second World War. Similarly, in *The Avengers*, Agent Coulson narrates the origin narrative of The Hulk to Rogers, informing the spectator that Bruce Banner’s experiments and his mutation were part of the military’s efforts to replicate the serum that created Captain America. Thus, though these epilogues are presented as fragmented elements, the allusions made to other superheroes within them suggest the intricate interconnectedness of the dissimilar characters in *The Avengers* that the spectator works to apprehend.

The film’s non-linearity and fragmentation is further evidenced in the character arcs of the Avengers team. Each superhero symbolises a surviving fragment of different eras in a lost cultural past that the postmodern subject in the contemporary milieu aches to remember. In this sense, *The Avengers* arguably applies Jameson’s ‘nostalgia mode’ in a postmodern pastiche.⁴⁶ However, the film problematises cohesive, simplistic and unambiguous characterisation.

Firstly, Thor is a Norse god who predates modern human civilisation and history, possibly representing ‘barbaric’ beliefs and aggressive rituals. Though these characteristics are suggested in Thor’s engagement with The Hulk in *The Avengers*, he remains level-headed and deeply forgiving of his brother’s machinations. Furthermore, Asgard is presented as a technologically-advanced society that

⁴²J. Lyotard, ‘Introduction’, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, UK, 1984, p.xxiv.

⁴³*Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.

⁴⁴*Postmodern Condition*, p.xvi.

⁴⁵*Thor*.

⁴⁶‘Postmodernism’, p.6.

successfully created the Tesseract and harnessed its power.⁴⁷ Thor's god-like and mythical persona is also undermined in *The Avengers* as it was in his bumbling lack of coordination in *Thor*. And, in his discussions with the Avengers team, he is portrayed as unable to fully comprehend Earth's language play. As the incarnation of Campbell's mythic hero, Thor is thus displaced from the contemporary symbolic order⁴⁸, hinting at the traditional hero's irrelevance and unacceptability in this current context.

Next, the Stark/Iron Man character represents the rise of industry and the military-industrial complex. From his residence in the penthouse of Stark Tower, Stark has a clear view of the Chrysler Building in New York, the architectural memorialisation of the early industrial period that created the urban landscape. He is wealthy, fiercely intelligent and classically attractive. His innovations and creations are cutting edge and stylish. Yet, his corporeal body is weakened by the very product that defines his superheroic persona: ironically, it is a cluster of shrapnel from his own weapons that is trying 'every second to crawl its way into [his] heart'.⁴⁹ In this way, the idealised portrayal of the Iron Man superhero, representative of urbanisation and exponential economic success, is also undermined. Consequently, the palliative effect of the nostalgia mode is disrupted by the intrusive reminder of historical loss.

Thirdly, aptly named 'the First Avenger', Captain America is a relic of the nationalistic rhetoric that characterised the Second World War era. Rogers exudes the characteristics popularised by the media in the 1940s and 1950s: he is a wholesome, humble, corn-fed American soldier, eager to serve his country. His iconic status is underscored in a humorous scene between Agent Coulson and Rogers:

- COULSON: I got to say, it's an honour to meet you officially. I sort of met you. I mean, I watched you while you were sleeping. I mean, I was present while you were unconscious from the ice. [Rogers moves to the cockpit window and Coulson follows, mimicking the former's stance] You know, it's really just a huge honour to have you on board.
- ROGERS: Well, I hope I'm the man for the job.
- COULSON: Oh, you are. Absolutely. We made some modifications to the uniform. I had a little design input.
- ROGERS: The uniform? Aren't the stars and stripes a little old-fashioned?
- COULSON: Everything that's happening, the things that are about to come to light, people might just need a little old-fashioned.

Coulson's childlike idolatry of Captain America and his 'vintage' Captain America card collection resonates with the nostalgia of childhood. Their exchange about Captain America's red, white and blue costume further illustrates the mode described by Jameson, where cultural production invests in a mythos that celebrates

⁴⁷*Thor*.

⁴⁸Designated by Jacques Lacan, the 'symbolic order' is the structure of familial and societal laws and roles into which the oedipalised subject enters as part of a community of others. From *The Seminar on Jacques Lacan: Freud's Papers on Technique: 1953-1954*, Book 1 (1988), J. Miller (ed.), J. Forrester (trans.), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1991, p.230.

⁴⁹*The Avengers*.

the 'old-fashioned' in preference to the present. However, similar to Thor's and Stark's characterisation, Rogers' traditional superheroic persona is consistently undermined. Though he is accustomed to assuming the leadership role in operations, Rogers' decisions are repeatedly challenged by the team. Moreover, as with Thor, Rogers is faced with an unfamiliar system of signs and is unable to comprehend cultural references. He is, Loki succinctly describes, 'The soldier; the man out of time',⁵⁰ and thus, out of the symbolic order.

Fourthly, juxtaposed with the above superheroic portrayals are Barton and Romanoff who are highly trained agents of espionage. They allude both to the Cold War era and contemporary American experience of hegemony and military prowess. However, the film destabilises the image of the superhero yet again as both spies make reference to their desire for redemption from the sins of their shared, questionable past which Romanoff describes as 'red in [her] ledger'.⁵¹ Furthermore, as revealed in a private exchange between them, they feel disempowered and unprepared to tackle the 'magic and monsters' in the diegesis.

In *The Avengers*, these fragmentary epilogues and character portrayals echo the episodic and untenable structure of the postmodern condition, reflecting the viewing subject's historical amnesia. Therefore, not only is the fantasy of return complicated by an anachronistic, hodgepodge assembly of superheroes, but as cultural artefacts, they 'return' to the cinematic screen, broken. Indeed, as Fury concedes to the World Security Council to which S.H.I.E.L.D. reports, the superheroes as individuals are, 'isolated; unbalanced even'.⁵² Their filmic refigurations against a cyclical, yet interconnected, contemporary setting in *The Avengers* effectively criticise valorisations of the cultural past that each superhero embodies, explicit in their characterisation earlier discussed. I suggest, however, that the superheroes' complex characterisation and humanisation facilitates the catharsis of postmodern anxiety. Their helplessness echoes that of the viewing subject – anachronistic, internally fragmented, disoriented and dislocated. Yet, their consequently *human* vulnerability encourages spectator identification.

By the reinscription of the *present* onto cultural artefacts of the past, a dialectical and collaborative relationship between the viewing subject and history is established through the narrative of *The Avengers*. In effect, the viewing subject gains access to a past that has been overwhelmed by a 'series of perpetual presents'.⁵³ This is achieved through an imaginative (re)creation and engaged (re)construction of history. Marianne Hirsch describes this 'postmemory' strategy in her study on the negotiation of historical memory and aesthetic representation:

Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.⁵⁴

The postmemory strategy employed by *The Avengers* allows an active confrontation with, and more importantly, reclamation of the past for the witnessing spectator in the present. *The Avengers* thus seeks to ameliorate historical amnesia by subverting 'the nostalgia mode'. Rather than effecting their isolation as put forward by Campbell, the film revises the superheroes' subjectivity as predicated on connection.

⁵⁰*The Avengers*.

⁵¹*The Avengers*.

⁵²*The Avengers*.

⁵³Postmodernism', p.11.

⁵⁴M. Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997, p.22.

Intersubjective Interpellation and Collaboration: Iron Man and Captain America

Concomitant with the invalidation of the traditional, wholly constituted superhero are the conflictual dynamics and resultant intersubjective interpellation of the Avengers team. This discussion has put forward that the alienation that defined traditional superheroes does not serve the needs presented by the postmodern condition. In origin narratives, the superhero's call to adventure is catalysed by the threat of a villain, the defeat of whom coincides with the superhero's transfiguration in the Campbellian sense,⁵⁵ and acceptance of his or her superheroic role. Similarly in *The Avengers*, Loki's arrival and plans to subjugate Earth are the main complication of the plot. However, the villain is unceremoniously and farcically defeated when the Hulk thumps him into submission during the battle in Manhattan.⁵⁶ Despite the villain's clear inclusion, in keeping with the tropes of the superhero film genre that have been popularised in the past decade, *The Avengers* uniquely invests in the dynamics of the superheroes for plot advancement. The superheroes' success and subject formation are contingent on their collaboration, a claim made by Fury to the World Security Council: '[W]ith the right push, they can be exactly what we need'.⁵⁷ This suggests that, applying Ulman and Brothers' model,⁵⁸ the journey of the postmodern superhero inheres in the quest for intersubjective interpellation. The Avengers team affords multiple opportunities for intersubjective interpellation which may best be seen in the characterisation of Steve Rogers and Tony Stark.

Childish connotations are attached to the character of Tony Stark, as when Stark characteristically warns in his fight with Thor, 'Don't take my stuff'. In the character's opening sequence, Pepper Potts, his assistant and love interest, first threatens to punish him for his deprecating comment about her involvement in the Stark Tower project. Here, Potts disciplines him by threatening to withhold sexual gratification. Later in the scene, she tells him that he has 'a lot of homework' and promises to reward him upon completion of his task: she suggestively whispers in his ear. Obediently, he accedes to Coulson's request for him to review the Avengers Initiative files.

Further, throughout the film, Stark petulantly undermines Steve Rogers' authority. First, Stark is an intrusive presence when Rogers reprises his role as Captain America in the apprehension of Loki. In this sequence, Rogers ceremoniously arrives in his 'old-fashioned' uniform just as Loki is about to annihilate a group of people kneeling in subjugation. While Rogers is engaged in a hand-to-hand scuffle with Loki, Stark hacks into the public address system on the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopter hovering above the scene and complements his arrival with rock music. Stark aims a weapon at Loki whose immediate submission renders Rogers speechless as he stands by in flaccid redundancy. Stark casts Rogers in the role of an 'older fellow' and pointedly deploys contemporary cultural references that emphasise the latter's displacement from the symbolic order:

STARK:	Still, you are pretty spry for an older fellow. So what, do you do Pilates?
ROGERS:	What?
STARK:	It's like calisthenics. You might have missed a few things doing time as a 'Cap'-sicle.

⁵⁵*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.20.

⁵⁶*The Avengers*.

⁵⁷*The Avengers*.

⁵⁸*Shattered Self*.

Stark's aggression to Rogers may be read as a cathexis of his anger towards his own late father, who 'never shut up about' Captain America.⁵⁹ His envy of Captain America is visible in *Iron Man 2* when he discovers the vibranium shield, symbolic of Rogers' active role in his father's life, from which he was excluded. As he contemplates the end of his life with Fury, he describes his estranged relationship with his father, who sent him away to military schools his entire life while the former focused on his research. According to Melanie Klein, the subject who deals with anxiety by splitting and idealising threatening or frightening objects - and in so doing, splitting and idealising the self in identification with the object - is caught in the 'paranoid-schizoid position'.⁶⁰ This position is characterised by feelings of superiority, arrogance and separation from others, clearly portrayed in the narcissism that insulates Stark in his penthouse in Stark Tower, away from the community. As such, Stark's position within the symbolic order and his subject formation are arguably complicated. In Klein's formulation, Stark has yet to move into the 'depressive position' that is indicative of the maturing process, with the ability 'to develop good object-relations and ... integrate his ego'.⁶¹

Steve Rogers, on the other hand, persistently attempts to fulfil what he perceives is his paternal role in the team. When he is told that in the face of possible annihilation 'people need a little 'old-fashioned'', he dutifully adorns the 'stars and stripes' despite believing it to be dated.⁶² Indeed, in his assumed role as purveyor of the Law of the Father, Rogers regularly chastises his team members when they provoke each other. The first instance of this is an apropos fight between three superheroic figures once lauded as heroes of their time: Thor, Stark and himself. Set in a clearing in the woods on the outskirts of the city, Rogers stands on a rock and orders Thor and Stark to stop fighting when he says, 'Hey, that's enough. Put the hammer down'. Aboard the Helicarrier in a later scene, Rogers walks into the room and reprimands Stark when the latter attempts to goad the 'green rage monster' out to play by poking Banner with a stick.

Invested in his image as a superhero, Rogers depends on his suit to signify his leadership role. When he rallies the superheroes to action, he uses the canned comic book reference, 'Suit up'. Later, as the tension between Stark and him mounts, he tells Stark to 'put on the suit' before agreeing to fight him. With Stark, Rogers also deploys paranoid-schizoid mechanisms that split objects: his teammates seem to be viewed as split parts of himself that he punishes or praises as good or bad, according to his own unwavering moral code. In addition, his suit is viewed as a split object symbolic of his (similarly split) superheroic persona. Thus, Rogers' appearance in the filmic narrative is thick with an atmosphere of frustration and loss. Couched in his comment to Fury that the war was won when he was sleeping,⁶³ are his feelings of dejection and lack of purpose. More pertinently, this severance from time and personal history marks Rogers as dealing with a crisis of identity which the film articulates by cutting his introductory scene with dark and fragmented flashbacks of his past as Captain America. As the film clarifies, it is only in the fragmented memories of his past that Rogers is able to 'see' himself. Lacking signification, Captain America finds himself bereft of other selfobjects that enable his subjectivity

⁵⁹*The Avengers*.

⁶⁰J. Segal, *Key Figures in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Melanie Klein*, Sage Publications, London, 1992, p.35.

⁶¹M. Klein, *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, vol. 3, p.9, cited in *Key Figures in Counselling and Psychotherapy: Melanie Klein*, 1992, p.37.

⁶²*The Avengers*.

⁶³*The Avengers*.

through their valuation of him.⁶⁴ That is to say, like Stark, Rogers has yet to deploy depressive mechanisms that will avail to him the opportunities to develop the relationships with others that will 'reinforce [a] sense of sharing the same world as other people'⁶⁵ now lost to him. To Rogers, Stark's repeated confrontation and flouting of rules further destabilises his position as 'Captain' which he tries to regain in their power struggles.

In what might be considered projective identification as conceived by Klein,⁶⁶ the characters express their hatred for the other, and so illuminate the shameful and personal failings they despise most about themselves, yet deny by forcing these hated split part-objects onto the other. Leading up to the climactic sequence of the film, Stark and Rogers face off and are poised for aggression:

ROGERS: 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.

STARK: I think I'll just cut the wire.

ROGERS: Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat,
 but you better stop pretending to be a hero.

STARK: A hero? Like you? You're a laboratory experiment,
 Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a
 bottle.

Notably in their heated exchange, they appear as oppositional, but laterally inverted, images of each other, presenting a visual representation of their projective identification with each other. Correspondingly, the viewing subject in spectator identification with the postmodern ego-ideal, experiences a figurative confrontation of history on the cinematic screen. This confrontation involves the juxtaposition of two periods of the cultural past - embodied by Stark and Rogers respectively - stripped of their nostalgic connotations and brought to the fore in the present diegetic conflict. The conflictual dynamics of these characters and the collaboration that will follow thus prepare their movement into the depressive position that will enable their realisation as subjects in the symbolic order.

In the Manhattan battle sequence, Rogers is in his full 'spangly suit' and lands on the hood of a car, dispensing orders to the policemen looking up at him. Echoing Stark's contention that Rogers could not lay claim to being a hero, they question his authority: 'Why should we listen to you?' Pointedly, as if on a raised stage as he appeared on the rock in the woods earlier in the film, Rogers responds in his performative role as a superhero and easily defeats three Chitauri who rush at him. The scene is a parody of previous superheroic portrayals, and the policemen immediately parrot Rogers' orders after his 'heroic' display. Later in the sequence, Rogers saves a group of civilians held hostage in a bank after Stark acknowledges him as leader of the Avengers' line of defence on the street. Taking the full blast of a Chitauri grenade, he falls backwards through a window onto the street below. The subsequent *mise-en-scène* is a long shot of Rogers' wounded, side profile amidst the city's destruction. Completing the visual depiction of Rogers' transfigured relationship to his community, the camera's eye then focuses on the gaze of one of the civilian hostages, now free. Significantly, she is later recorded saying that she would forever be grateful to Captain America. Now symbolically reborn through the

⁶⁴Heinz Kohut, p.71.

⁶⁵Key Figures in Counselling, p.37.

⁶⁶Key Figures in Counselling, p.36.

shattering window, Captain America is humanised, unmasked, and paradoxically restored to his superheroic status by Stark's interpellation of him as leader of the team and his receipt of gratitude from the wider community. In *The Avengers*, therefore, Rogers' subjectivity is not the result of the final separation from the unresolved Oedipal conflict as set out by Sigmund Freud and espoused by earlier incarnations of the superhero. Instead of the suit, a split object that is an image of a superhero emptied of meaning, therefore, Rogers' subjectivity and desire for signification is now located in his self-selfobject relationships established with the Avengers and the civilians he saves.

Stark's subject formation occurs when he redirects the nuclear missile aimed for Manhattan through the portal and at the Chitauri mothership. In contrast to requiring Pepper's maternal approval in his opening scene, an image of Pepper enters Stark's visual field when he instructs his computer to dial her number, hoping to bid her farewell in this sequence. The subsequent disappearance of Pepper's image from the screen and Stark's calm acceptance of the failed phone call symbolises his incomplete severance from his mother-figure and his acquired ability, now in the depressive position, to hold 'a mental representation of the absent mother as good'.⁶⁷ Also evidence of his movement to the depressive position is Stark's sacrificial act, implying a shift in the location of his anxiety from himself to other objects that he feels responsible for, contrary to Rogers' earlier accusation of his narcissism. For Stark, his earlier confrontation with Rogers possibly made him conscious of the parts of himself he despises and his prior isolation is thus rejected in favour of collaboration with the Avengers team. Here, Stark's desire for an Oedipal confrontation with his father-figure, as represented by Rogers, is symbolically relinquished in favour of the self-selfobject relationships that Stark finally accepts for his ego integration. Juxtaposed with Rogers' metaphorical fall into the symbolic order, Stark falls through the closing portal and onto the street below, in a symbolic rebirth, consistent with the motif of return in the film.

Engagement, Recollection, Reconstruction

Additionally, death is another motif that *The Avengers* deploys to contain the traumatic loss of time and history in the postmodern superheroes' portrayal. Firstly, the Avengers' successful negotiation of their differences and consequent rise to action are hastened by the death of Agent Phil Coulson, an enduring and benign presence in each of their character arcs. Fury capitalises on Coulson's death when he retrieves the latter's Captain America card collection from his locker, then presents them to Rogers and Stark, smeared with blood. Of his manipulation, Fury explains, 'They needed the push. They found it', lending meaning to Coulson's last words:

COULSON: Sorry, boss. I'm clocked out here. It's okay, boss. This was never going to work if they didn't have something to ... [he dies; his sentence unfinished; his eyes unclosed].⁶⁸

Having been spurred to action by the death of a loved character, the Avengers finally negotiate group cohesion in the climactic battle. Their collaboration results in spectacular damage to most of Manhattan. Here, The Hulk, feared for the absolute destruction he causes, is revealed as the team's 'secret weapon'. The Hulk, a 'mindless beast [who] makes play he's still a man', causes unfathomable destruction

⁶⁷Key Figures in Counselling, p.38.

⁶⁸*The Avengers*.

to the buildings of Manhattan in his rage, and remains unscathed by the Chitauri forces. Yet, it is The Hulk who summarily defeats Loki and more importantly, saves Stark from his free fall out of the closing portal. Despite his incarnation as rage and destruction personified, the Hulk is presented as vital in the successful completion of the Avengers' mission to save Earth.

It follows then that the death that motivates the Avengers and the destruction caused by their collaboration is presented as necessary in effecting the viewing subject's historical reclamation. In 'City Memory, City History: Urban Nostalgia, *The Colossus of New York*, and Late-Twentieth-Century Historical Fiction', Tamar Katz's view of urban nostalgia contrasts with that of Jameson's.⁶⁹ Katz argues that in the ever-changing present, the only way to know the urban landscape and be affiliated to it is by engaging in its construction in memory.⁷⁰ Citing Susan Stewart's observation that the 'point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire',⁷¹ Katz correctly claims that:

We not only want to know about the history of urban public space; we want to imagine such historical spaces as vanished, and we do so in order to see ourselves redeeming them through memory.⁷²

This historical redemption is thus successfully achieved by *The Avengers* pastiche through the postmemory of the engaged postmodern subject. Furthermore, the film addresses the postmodern 'desire [for] less traditional communities and forms of social convergence imagined through conflict rather than consensus'⁷³: the unity of the traditional ego-ideal is given over to continued internal fragmentation and tenuous negotiation of subjectivity within a community, reflecting and thus ameliorating postmodern anxiety. The resistance to any amalgamation of historical fragments into a coherent whole has been demonstrated in my consideration of the characterisation and superheroic subjectivity of both Rogers and Stark above. That is, the postmodern superheroic configuration departs from past superhero portrayals that demanded the formation of the subject through the complete separation from the Freudian past achieved through Oedipalisation. As revised in *The Avengers*, the superheroes' subjectivity instead prefers a persistently unresolved, in-progress and contingent *present*, wherein subjectivity is no longer estranged by self-definition and self-determination, but is predicated on negotiating mutable self-subject relationships. In addition, the film's engagement with personal and communal history is portrayed in the closing sequence of the film through the conflicting witness testimonies, varied opinions and artwork from the diegetic public. Cut with scenes of the superheroes' dispersal on amicable terms is a montage of media clips on computer screens, projecting videos of the city's rituals of grief, celebration and reconstruction. The Avengers' intervention here has led to an outpouring of subjective responses, with participants memorialising the event as they bear witness to it, involving and reintegrating the subject in history's creation. In this way, it is, ironically, the loss of the urban landscape that prompts an engagement with it – and history – through recollection and equally importantly,

⁶⁹T. Katz, 'City Memory, City History: Urban Nostalgia, *The Colossus of New York*, and Late Twentieth-Century Historical Fiction', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2010, pp.810-851.

⁷⁰City Memory, City History', p.810.

⁷¹S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1985, p.22.

⁷²*On Longing*, p.812.

⁷³*On Longing*, p.814.

through its reconstruction. Certainly, the Avengers project's attempt to ameliorate the traumatic effects of historical loss accords with Joseph Campbell's view:

Schism in the soul, schism in the body social, will not be resolved by any scheme of return to the good old days ... or by programs guaranteed to render an ideal projected future ... or even by the most realistic, hardheaded work to weld together again the deteriorating elements. Only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new ... a continuous “recurrence of birth” ... to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death.⁷⁴

Resisting Resolution: A Return to the Present

Stubbornly resisting resolution, *The Avengers* defies the closure of the Avengers project with its own fragmented epilogue. Here, The Other, seen in the film's opening scene, recognises the triumph of the Avengers against the Chitauri in Manhattan:

THE OTHER: Humans. They are not the cowering wretches we were promised. They stand. They are unruly and therefore cannot be ruled. To challenge them is to court death.

Appropriately, the scene ends with a monstrous, facial close-up of Thanos, baring a thin, yellow smile, affronting the cinema spectator and promising this challenge. Forestalling confidence in the victory of the Avengers, the film thus declares itself as yet another narrative fragment, engaging the viewing subject's investment in further collaborative narration.

In conclusion, in *Marvel's The Avengers*, the fantasy of return is first pitched, but is poignantly denied sustained fulfilment. I have argued above that instead of a return to a past imagined to be wholly constituted, the film effects a return to the condition of the *present*, characterised as non-linear, multi-layered, *assembled* and uncertain. Thus, the 'nostalgia mode' is first affirmed, but subsequently subverted through the film's investment in postmemory, then further supported by its revision of superheroic subjectivity. Accordingly, *Marvel's The Avengers* seeks to contain the trauma of temporal displacement and historical amnesia through an engagement with the past as reimagined by the present.

⁷⁴*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.16.

Marvel movie fans' relationship with Joss Whedon has been a series of ups and downs, to say the least. When he was first announced as the director behind Marvel Studios' *The Avengers*, there were plenty who felt it was a bad idea. Whedon's passion for the material was never in question, but as a filmmaker? Well he hadn't really proved himself to be very cinematic in nature, so some were wary of seeing him take on Marvel's biggest movie to date in the wake of directors like Kenneth Branagh and Jon Favreau. So when it was announced that Whedon was further signing on to write and direct *The Avengers 2* as well as act as a chief creative consultant on Marvel's entire Phase Two slate, fans were elated. And then came the lowpoint once more. *MARVEL'S AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON* director Joss Whedon speaks to Lorraine Cink about new team members Vision (Paul Bettany), Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen), and Quicksilver (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) in addition to the veterans we've met in previous Marvel films. It looks like we can expect a few surprises. *MARVEL'S AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON* arrives in theaters May 1. Sean Gerber. Introduction *MARVEL'S The Avengers* is a Hollywood film directed by Joss Whedon, and inspired by the Marvel Comics series of the same name created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Since its release in cinemas in April 2012, the film has been ranked third in the "All Time Box Office: Worldwide Grosses" list published by Box Office Mojo, a leading online box office reporting service.² The film is the culmination of an ambitious six-film project by Marvel Studios begun in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*³ and *The Incredible Hulk*. *The Avengers* is an undoubtedly postmodern pastiche, rife with complex, entropic turns and interconnected plot elements from the discrete narratives of its five preceding films. This article focuses on the collaboration of the superheroes and discusses the way in