BADASS BITCHES, DAMSELS IN DISTRESS, OR SOMETHING IN BETWEEN?:

Representation of female characters in superhero action films

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Tämän tutkielman aiheena on tutkia suosittujen supersankarielokuvien naishahmojen representaatioita. Tarkoitus on selvittää, kuinka naishahmoja representoidaan eli kuvataan visuaalisin keinoin, puheen/dialogin keinoin, erilaisten käyttäytymismallien kautta sekä kuinka hahmot *toimivat* elokuvissa, eli mikä hahmojen rooli on elokuvan juonen kannalta. Aineisto koostui viidestä (5) elokuvasta ja näiden elokuvien viidestä (5) naispäähahmosta. Aineistona käytetyt elokuvat olivat *The Dark Knight Rises, The Amazing Spider-Man, Iron Man 3, Captain America: The Winter Soldier* ja *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Laadullisen analyysin perustana käytettiin kriittistä diskurssianalyysia, tekstianalyysia sekä Greimasin aktanttimallia. Analyysissa kiinnitettiin huomiota hahmojen visuaaliseen ilmeeseen, puheeseen ja käytökseen, sekä siihen, mitä hahmot *tekivät* elokuvan juonessa. Hahmoja analysoitiin yksityiskohtaisesti yksi kerrallaan vanhimmasta elokuvasta uusimpaan ja sen seurauksena oli mahdollista havaita samankaltaisuuksia hahmojen kesken sekä jonkin verran muutosta representaatioissa elokuvien välillä.

Analyysi osoitti että naishahmot ovat ruumiinrakenteiltaan hyvin samankaltaisia eivätkä hahmot täten edusta monipuolista kuvaa naisvartaloista. Lisäksi naishahmojen määrä suhteessa mieshahmoihin oli hyvin pieni, mikä vaikuttaa myös siihen ettei elokuvissa juurikaan esiinny naisten keskistä kommunikointia. Naishahmot kuitenkin ilmensivät useita erilaisia käyttäytymismalleja, joiden perusteella oli mahdollista todeta, että hahmot ovat monipuolisempia kuin alun perin oli ajateltu aiemman tutkimuksen perusteella. Kahdessa uudemmassa elokuvassa naishahmojen roolit olivat myös juonellisesti merkittävämmät, mikä viittaa jonkinasteiseen kehitykseen naishahmojen representaatioissa nykyaikana.

Asiasanat – Keywords representaatio, naishahmot, elokuvat, supersankarit, feministinen elokuvantutkimus

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1 INTRODUCTION

For the past four years, the summer season of movie theater box office has been dominated by films that bring characters known from comic books to life and accessible to audiences wider than the comic book enthusiasts. In 2012 it was the superhero assembly movie *The Avengers* (Marvel Studios), followed in 2013 by the third installation into the *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios) franchise, and in the summer of 2014 the box office was dominated by yet another superhero ensemble film by the Marvel Studios, *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Box Office Mojo n.d.a). In the summer of 2015, the sequel to *The Avengers* film known as *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (again, a Marvel Studios production) ranked second in the box office listing, following *Jurassic World*. These four comic book adaptations are merely the tip of the iceberg, and it is evident that the film studios are not going to stop releasing more movies with iconic superhero comic book characters anytime soon.

Indeed, Marvel Entertainment, LLC., which is one of the largest character-based entertainment companies in the world and best known for its comic books and films (Marvel n.d.), posted on its official Twitter page in November 2014 the studio's upcoming film schedule which included nine films and their planned release dates spanning between 2016 and 2019 (Marvel 2014). The films will add to what Marvel calls its 'cinematic universe' (or MCU for Marvel's Cinematic Universe), which refers to the shared universe in Marvel's films in which the characters exist, allowing characters to appear across different Marvel films as well as allowing for the films to acknowledge events from another film belonging to the same cinematic universe (Siede 2015). The notion of a cinematic universe as opposed to the comic book universe also allows alterations to the original comic book stories as they are transferred to the big screen while still utilizing familiar characters and storyline elements. This kind of shared universe in films was revolutionary from Marvel, as it has never been done before to the same extent. DC Entertainment, which is a major competitor to Marvel, also released

their film schedule around the same time in 2014, revealing 10 new comic book film adaptations due to be released between 2016 and 2020 (Keyes 2014).

With the increasing popularity of these action-adventure comic book film adaptations involving superhero characters it is worthwhile to pay attention to the female characters depicted in these films because, as will be discussed in 2.3 and 2.4, the depiction of female characters in both comic books and cinema has traditionally been problematic and stereotypical. Already at first glance it is also evident that female characters are a minority in these films: for example, in the promotional poster of *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Appendix 1) there are five characters and only one of them is female (while two of the characters are a raccoon and a walking-talking tree). In the casting list of *The Dark Knight Rises*, a movie based on the DC comic book character Batman, only two of the 15 top billed cast members are female (IMDb n.d.). The numbers appear alarming and quite surprising, considering the slow but steady increase in films featuring a female lead, such as the successful *The Hunger Games* franchise with Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen as well as the *Divergent* franchise with Shailene Woodley playing the lead character Tris.

The marginality of female characters in major roles in superhero films appears rather persistent despite the growing demand for strong and versatile female portrayals from the audiences: one only needs to surf around the web and social media blogging sites such as Tumblr to come across posts demanding stand-alone feature films for female comic book characters such as Wonder Woman[1], Ms. Marvel (or Captain Marvel), and Black Widow. There even exists a Tumblr blog solely dedicated to advocating an individual movie for Black Widow, who is played by Scarlett Johansson in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, called 'Where is my Black Widow movie?' (whereismyblackwidowmovie.tumblr.com). Even actor Robert Downey Jr., who plays Tony Stark/Iron Man and is a co-star to Scarlett Johansson in *Iron Man 2* and both of

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[1] At the time of writing this thesis (spring 2016), a Wonder Woman film is in fact in the making, and it is due to be released in 2017.

[2] The hashtag '#' symbol is used on social media site Twitter (and nowadays the use of it has also spread to other social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram) to categorize users' messages, or "tweets".

The Avengers films, has said that Johansson deserves her own Black Widow movie (Phillips 2014). The companies who put out these films and manufacture the merchandise were also criticized in the social media for excluding the female characters from the merchandise altogether. For example the character of Gamora, a female assassin who is a part of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* ensemble, was not included in the film's merchandise t-shirts and displays at all, resulting in fans using the hashtag[2] "#wheresgamora" on Twitter to confront Disney and let the company know that girls are also a lucrative customer segment (Baker-Whitelaw 2014).

There has also been a great deal of criticism concerning not only the small number of female characters in these type of films but also the lack of ethnic diversity in the films' characters, or in the actors who play them. Low (2014) gathers together statistics, which state that, for example, among the top 100 United States grossing films through 2014 only 8% of the films feature a protagonist of color other than white, and furthermore none of these protagonists are female. It is worth noting that the lack of ethnic diversity in films is not merely a problem with female characters, but a majority of the male characters are also portrayed by Caucasian actors. The 2015 as well as 2016 Academy Awards were heavily criticized for their blatant lack of ethnic diversity as there were no non-white actors or actresses nominated across the four acting categories in either year (Griggs 2016). In fact, out of all 127 nominees across all the categories, only nine represented ethnicities other than Caucasian in the 2015 Academy Awards (McCarthy 2015). It is evident that the whole film industry suffers from lack of equality in both gender issues and ethnic diversity.

Why study films then? In the grand scheme of things, one might think studying films - which are perhaps more generally thought to be light entertainment as opposed to "high culture" or a serious art form - is a form of "Mickey Mouse science" instead of a

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[2] The hashtag '#' symbol is used on social media site Twitter (and nowadays the use of it has also spread to other social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram) to categorize users' messages, or "tweets". Using the #-symbol before a relevant keyword or phrase (without spaces and/or special markings as seen with "wheresgamora") helps show messages more easily in Twitter Search, and makes it easier for users to track a topic of interest. (Twitter Help Center 2014).

serious scientific field of study. Films, however, as Bogarosh (2013: 5) argues, are "ideological messengers" conveying the values and conceptions of our societies. Furthermore, especially large blockbuster films such as many of the Marvel and DC superhero films work outside the immediate medium of film itself: due to large marketing forces behind the films, societies are exposed to the films through advertising campaigns, theme parks, toys and other merchandise, marketing tie-ins with fast-food franchises, books, video games, social media discussions, etc. (Bogarosh 2013: 6). In other words, one does not even have to see the actual films to be exposed to the ideologies presented in them. And as was mentioned earlier, for example, excluding the film's only major female character from children's toys and other merchandise sends a message that it is not somehow "proper" or appropriate for girls and boys to play with superheroine dolls or wear clothing with female superheroes on them.

The topic of this study, which is the representation of female characters – i.e. how they are portrayed – in superhero action films matters, because a great deal of the viewers are in fact female. For example, Motion Picture Association of America (2015) (henceforth MPAA) reports that in 2014, 52% of moviegoers in the United States and Canada were female, which is identical to the previous year. The MPAA report also states that women continue to buy exactly half of movie tickets. This coincides with the infographic produced by the New York Film Academy, stating that women purchase half of the movie tickets in the United States (New York Film Academy 2013). National Women's History Museum reports that 40 percent of the viewers who went to see *The Avengers* in theaters were female (National Women's History Museum n.d.), while 44 percent of the audience who went to see *Guardians of the Galaxy* was female according to ComicBook.com (2014). Considering these numbers, which show quite clearly that women – among them also younger girls – make up roughly half of the audience for these superhero comic book film adaptations, it is important to pay attention to what kinds of images and representations the films convey to especially their younger and more impressionable audience members - both girls and boys. As King (2006) and Steinke (2005) (as cited by Bogarosh 2013: 5) point out, the images that Hollywood films

circulate give society a "collective sense of what sorts of leaders women make, how women should act and look, what the norm is for femininity, etc.", often resulting in images conforming to stereotypes.

The key term in this study is 'representation'. As Oxford Dictionary of English defines the word, representation means "the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way", often produced in an artistic medium such as film. In the scope of the current study, representation therefore means the images, feelings, ideas, and ideologies conveyed through various means on the screen. (I will discuss representation in relation to critical discourse analysis in more detail in chapter 3.2 and provide some theoretical definitions as well). The representation of women in different mediums (e.g. newspapers, magazines, advertisements) has been a popular area of study within discourse studies, and the representations of fictional female characters have been studied to some extent before, for example, in television series, Disney animation films, and video games, and more generally in the film industry (see e.g. Mustonen 2015; Davis 2007; Jansz and Martis 2007; and Lauzen 2015a). Research that focuses on female characters in superhero action-adventure-scifi films, however, has not been conducted as much (but see e.g. Stoltzfus 2014; Hendricks 2013; and Gray and Kaklamanidou 2011), or at least research done on more recent films has not been published yet.

The purpose of my study is to take an in-depth look at the main female characters in five highly successful comic book film adaptations in recent years and analyze in detail how the characters are represented through their visual appearance and speech, what kind of behavior they exhibit, and how they function in the films' storylines. My approach will draw on insights from critical discourse analysis and textual analysis, both of which I will describe in more detail in the methodology section (chapter 3.2). The aim of this analysis is to find out how versatile the portrayals of the female characters are (or are not), what kinds of images of women are represented, and whether it is possible to distinguish certain roles in which the characters generally

function. If possible, I will also attempt to draw some generalizations based on my analysis.

The arrangement of the current study is as follows: in chapter 2 the theoretical and contextual background relevant to the study is introduced. Chapter 3 lays out the aims and research questions of the study, as well as describes the methods and data selection process. The chapter also includes brief descriptions of the films and provides some background information on the characters chosen as the data for the study. Chapter 4 consists of the main body of this thesis: the analysis. The analysis is divided into subsections, each subsection focusing on a specific female character and her detailed analysis. Finally, chapter 6 features a concluding discussion, in which the findings of the study are presented in relation to the research questions and previous research, followed by the implications of the present study, possible limitations of the study, and finally, suggestions for future research.

2 THEORY AND CONTEXT

In this section I will introduce the theoretical framework of the current study and provide some context into studying women in superhero films. First, I will introduce the field of gender studies, which functions as a more general framework in which the current study operates. Second, I will move on to discuss the fields of feminist film theory and feminist film criticism, which are, together with gender studies, the two main fields of research most relevant to the study at hand. Third, for the purposes of the specific focus of the current study, I will discuss the representation of female characters in comic books. Comic books are the original source texts for the films analyzed in this thesis, and therefore it is appropriate to consider their portrayal of women as well, before shifting the focus solely on films. Then in chapter 2.4 I will move on to discuss how women have traditionally been portrayed in cinema, both in general and in action genre films, and whether there has been any development in the representations. Finally, in chapter 2.5 I will introduce and discuss previous research that has been conducted on superhero action films.

2.1 Gender studies and superheroes

The current study can be placed within the field of gender studies, as the aim is to look at representations of women in superhero action films. Gender studies is a vast, interdisciplinary field and can be paired with nearly every other field of research, which is why a comprehensive account of the field falls outside the scope of this study. Hence, in this chapter I will give a brief overview of how gender is defined in research and what is generally meant by gender studies, after which I will continue to focus on the relationship between gender studies, films, and superheroes, in particular.

To begin with, it is important to distinguish between sex and gender. Simply put, sex is determined biologically, i.e. one is born either a boy or a girl according to genitalia (or in some cases a baby's sex is decided by the parents or the doctor), while gender is

constructed through social, cultural, and psychological means, i.e. gender is a social structure (Holtzman and Sharpe 2014: 68). Connell (2002: 9) discusses the definition of 'gender' in more detail, addressing its relationship with bodies, and more specifically the bodily difference between males and females, which is recognized in "the commonsense definition of gender as an expression of natural difference". Connell (2002: 10) argues that, while it is problematic to assume social structures simply express these biological differences, it is safe to say that society puts "reproductive difference into play". In other words, "gender concerns the way human society deals with human bodies" (ibid.). According to Connell, this view takes into account that gender patterns are bound to cultural context and thus may differ from one culture to another. Connell (ibid.: 27) also points out that gender is not a fixed category, and talking about gender is a complex matter as it requires taking into account many different products of social processes (e.g. relationships, practices, identities, images) as well as the historical circumstances in which they are formed, and the many effects they have on people's lives.

Gender studies deals with issues related to gender representation, gender identity, and the construction of gender, and as an interdisciplinary field, examines femininity and masculinity in relation to various subject matters and contexts (Connell 2002). While feminism and gender studies have long gone hand in hand, and a great deal of research has been done specifically on representation of women, gender studies is not merely about studying women and femininity. Representations of masculinity are not unproblematic either. Gender studies analyzes, for example, how gender is constructed in media (e.g. children's advertising, films, magazines), or how gender is constructed and acquired from the moment one is born: Connell (2002: 76-77) talks about blue and pink babies, and how blue babies (i.e. boys) are expected to behave different from pink babies (i.e. girls), and how this distinction between the two sexes carries on throughout the blue and pink babies' lives in the way that they are given different toys (footballs, toy trucks, and toy guns for boys and dolls and makeup kits for girls) and taught different things (boys would be taught how to earn a living, fix cars, and solve

mathematical problems while girls would be taught how to cook and clean, and make themselves attractive). While these examples of gendered upbringing may seem old-fashioned, in many ways they are still in effect in today's society: dressing baby boys/girls in blue/pink, respectively, is still often considered the norm, and children's toys are marketed in a heavily gendered fashion to either boys or girls[3].

Children learn gender-appropriate behavior through positive and negative reinforcement received from their parents, peers, school, and media, in other words through socialization (Connell 2002: 77). Connell (2002: 77-78), however, finds the socialization model problematic, saying there are "multiple patterns of masculinity and femininity in contemporary societies" instead of only one, and that learning gender cannot be simply about acquiring appropriate traits. Moreover, Connell (ibid.) criticizes the socialization model for presenting the learner as passive, which he or she is not based on studies conducted on elementary school children who constantly evaluate the gender roles provided by adults, either accepting or denying them, testing different gender self-presentations and even setting up their own gender divisions. Gauntlett (2002: 18) also supports the argument that acquiring gender is not a straightforward process, but involves a "complex interaction of thoughts, evaluations, negotiations, emotions and reactions". Therefore in considering how gender is acquired, while socialization arguably has a role in it, it is crucial to also consider that learners are equally active in evaluating and constructing gender norms and roles.

Gender representations – i.e. the portrayal of femininity and masculinity in particular ways – in media have been studied a great deal, from advertising and news articles to television and films. Gauntlett (2002) gives a broad overview of how gender has been represented in different mediums in the past. The conclusion that he (2002: 42-56) provides is that the representations of gender in mass media used to be very

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[3] See, for example, *Consuming kids: the commercialization of childhood* (2008), a documentary by A. Barbaro and J. Earp, and an article by Sweet, E. (2014).
http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/12/toys-are-more-divided-by-gender-now-than-they-were-50-years-ago/383556/

stereotyped, for example, women in advertising were often portrayed as housewives or secretaries concerned about beauty and family related issues, while men were shown in authority roles concerned about achievement and having fun. Representations, however, started to change from the 1990s onwards with more equal portrayals of men and women: television saw an increase in female characters in successful careers alongside men, and men were given more varied characteristics such as sensitivity and gentleness both in television and film; films also saw an increase in strong assertive female characters, and sexual minorities began their emergence into mainstream television (Gauntlett 2002: 57-90).

As regards superhero narratives, Stabile (2009: 87) argues that while the narratives are more diverse in regard to race and ethnicity nowadays, gender remains their Achilles heel. According to Stabile (ibid.), superhero comics build around the premise that someone needs to be protected and saved, and that someone is perpetually female or at least feminized, while the role of the protector (as well as the threat) is masculinized. The female vulnerability is also used as the reason and justification for the protector's acts of violence. Stabile (ibid.: 88) also claims that efforts to depict women as superheroes, or simply heroes, have failed due to the gendered "protection scenario" described above and the need to recycle sexist stereotypes in order not to offend the profit-driven world of television. As an example, Stabile describes the TV-series *Heroes* (2006-2010), where one of the central female characters, a young cheerleader Claire, has the ability to heal herself from any mortal wound, but despite this superheroesque ability she is rendered helpless and dependent on the protection of the main male characters.

I have given here only a few examples of the studies conducted on gender and superheroes. Many of the issues mentioned here will come up again in later chapters, as gender representation is an inseparable part of some of the previous studies, as well as the current study. A more detailed and in-depth look at the representation of female

characters in superhero comic books is given in Chapter 2.3, and gender is also present in Chapter 2.5 where I will look at more previous research done on superhero films.

2.2 Feminist film theory and film criticism

In this chapter I will introduce and discuss feminist film theory and feminist film criticism, which are the two main fields of study linked to the current research. Feminist film theory and feminist film criticism are vast disciplines, and quite complex at that as well, and therefore I will deal with the most basic issues of these disciplines and issues most relevant to my research in as concise and simple manner as possible to best serve the purpose of the current study, which is concerned with the representation of female characters in action-type superhero films.

The fields of feminist film theory and feminist film criticism grew from the women's political movement in the late 1960s (Erens 1990: xvi). The first approaches to film analysis from the feminist point of view in the 1970s made use of sociological approaches, in other words, they looked at how the female characters on film related to the social, political, and cultural history of the era, how the characters were stereotyped, whether they were active or passive, and what kind of models they provided for women in the audience (Erens 1990: xvi). Another approach to feminist film analysis derives from psychoanalysis, semiotics as well as Marxist ideology, and focuses on "the way a text constructs a viewing subject, and the ways in which the very mechanisms of cinematic production affect the representation of women and reenforce (*sic*) sexism" (Erens 1990: xvii). This approach introduced semiotics to feminist film criticism, arguing that especially in the dominant Hollywood cinema women on screen were "merely signs for all that is non-male", and that women were presented only as what they represent for men, instead of showing "women as women" (Erens 1990: xvii, Johnston 1999 [1976]: 249, Cowie 2000: 49).

In the 1970s women entered the filmmaking scene mainly in the form of documentaries, as not only were documentaries cheaper and technically easier to make but they also provided a favorable platform for dealing with women's issues, such as abortion, rape, and job discrimination, which had not been addressed on film before (Erens 1990: xviii). In regard to fictional films, Johnston (1999 [1976]: 252-254) proposed the idea of counter cinema, which highlighted the relationship between ideology and filmmaking, stating that filmmaking with its tools and techniques is "an expression of the prevailing ideology" and is therefore never neutral. With "counter cinema", Johnston (1999 [1976]: 252-254) argues that films made by women could work as alternative for "male, bourgeois cinema" by challenging the sexist ideologies within the Hollywood cinema. Johnston's ideas shaped the work of many female filmmakers as they sought ways to encourage audiences to critique and question the images on the screen (Erens 1990: xix). Cowie (2000 [1978]: 48-49) also calls film "an ideological practice" that is assumed to carry "ideological effects", namely in masking or reinforcing definitions of women in society. The problem, according to Cowie, has been that film has been seen merely as a site for the representation of definitions, which have been defined and theorized outside the film itself when, in fact, definitions are also produced within film.

One of the most influential concepts in feminist film theory has been Laura Mulvey's theory of 'the male gaze' (Erens 1990: xix). Mulvey (1990 [1975]: 28-40) draws upon Freud's work in the field of psychoanalysis and argues that in film, women signify the male desire, bearing the look of the male viewer. Mulvey bases her analysis on Freud's concept of scopophilia (pleasure in looking), arguing that essentially films give spectators "an illusion of looking in on a private world". She distinguishes between three types of looking: the look of the camera, the look of the audience watching the film, and the look of the characters at each other (Mulvey 1990 [1975]: 28-40). She argues that pleasure in looking has been divided between "active/male" and "passive/female": the male gaze projects its fantasies onto the female figure, which through strong visual and erotic coding connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey ibid.: 33). According to Mulvey, women on the screen have functioned on two levels: as erotic

objects for the [largely male] characters within the story and as erotic objects for the spectator of the film (ibid). Kaplan (2000 [1983]: 120) seems to carry on with Mulvey's thought by arguing, "screen images of women are sexualized no matter what the women are doing literally, or what kind of plot may be involved". Therefore, what the psychoanalytic and semiotic approach to feminist film analysis argues is that the dominant cinematic structure is constructed by heterosexual men for heterosexual men (Kaplan 2000 [1983]: 122).

Another aspect of Mulvey's (1990 [1975]: 31-32) theory is that films also develop scopophilia in "its narcissistic aspect", meaning that pleasure comes from identification with the image seen on the screen. Mulvey argues that the reason women are objectified on screen is because man is reluctant to gaze at his own figure in exhibitionist role – "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (Mulvey 1990 [1975]: 34). Thus, she (ibid.) argues it is necessary for the spectator to identify with the active, controlling main male protagonist of the story, resulting in an illusion of control and possession of the woman within the diegesis (i.e. the film's world).

Many theorists have since provided their own interpretations and answers to the issue of female spectatorship as well as criticism of the male gaze concept. Mulvey's view excludes the female spectator completely, and like Erens (1990: xx) summarizes, implies pessimistically that Hollywood cinema has nothing to offer women except "images of their own objectification". Rich (1990 [1978]: 278), however, criticizes the female spectator's passivity implied by Mulvey's theory, arguing that female viewers in fact interact with the film, reprocessing and often resisting what is seen on the screen. In other words, women participate actively in the creation of meaning. Rich (ibid.) also notes that films – like other texts – can be interpreted to mean something other than what their intended purpose or meaning is: they can be "transformed at the level of reception". Bergstrom (1979, as cited by Erens 1990: xxi) on the other hand rejects Mulvey's idea that identification can only occur between members of the same sex, thus arguing that the previously disregarded female spectator could very well identify with

the active male protagonist instead of being constrained to identify with the female object of desire. Mulvey (1981) also later revised her earlier statements, and as Erens (1990: xxi) paraphrases in an accessible manner: "Mulvey now said that women could adopt either a masochistic female position by identifying with the female object of desire or a male position by becoming the active viewer of the text, thus assuming a degree of control through transsexual identification".

In relation to the "male gaze", Kaplan (2000 [1983]: 130) argues that the gaze is not necessarily male in its literal sense, but the gaze as an active and owned attribute is a predominantly masculine position. Kaplan (2000 [1983]: 128-129) bases this argument on her analysis on films such as *Saturday Night Fever* where the male protagonist has been assigned the role of the object of woman's gaze. Kaplan (ibid.) argues that in these cases where the man has stepped out of his traditional role as the controller of action and placed as the sex object, the woman then necessarily takes on the masculine role "as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action", losing her traditionally feminine characteristics such as humaneness, kindness, and motherliness. Koch (1980, as cited by Smelik 1999) on the other hand recognizes that women could find pleasure in looking at female figure on screen as well, and that women could in fact find a "positive image of autonomous femininity" in on-screen women. Gauntlett (2002: 39) criticizes Mulvey's theory for denying the heterosexual female gaze completely. As Gauntlett points out, films often include and even celebrate physically attractive men, thus drawing women into cinemas to gaze at their sexual allure (consider, for example, the 2012 film *Magic Mike* and its 2015 sequel *Magic Mike XXL*, which wallow in the sexual allure of male strippers). Indeed, nowadays it seems male actors cannot escape the media's and film industry's objectification and sexualization any more than female actresses can, rendering Mulvey's theory – specifically her notion that the male body "cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" – slightly outdated.

In addition to not including the female spectator, the male gaze theory also excludes the homosexual (gay and lesbian) spectator. In other words, in underlining identification

with the heterosexual male gaze, Mulvey's original theory denies the homosexual spectator's identification with neither the heterosexual male nor the objectified female. Drukman (1995), for example, sets out to establish the 'gay gaze', which would allow for the homosexual spectator to identify with representations appealing to the gay gaze, such as images of two men holding hands or men enjoying another man's appearance. Drukman's 'gay gaze', however, only accounts for male homosexuals. Evans and Gamman (1995: 36) discuss some theories, which attempt to account for the lesbian spectator and suggest a 'lesbian gaze', but they seem to arrive at the conclusion that "no adequate model of spectatorship has been posited for *any* individual or social group" (emphasis added).

Feminist film theory has also been criticized for its lack of including racial differences in its theories of representations of women. For example, the male gaze theory has been criticized for being negotiated through whiteness, while the black man's gaze has been presented as socially prohibited (Gaines 2000 [1988]: 346-347). In addition, according to Gaines (2000 [1988]: 341), the feminist film theory also disregards black feminists' notion that black females do not necessarily view the black male "as patriarchal antagonist" but may in fact identify with him and share with him their racial oppression. Thus, Gaines demands that the historical aspect of black oppression and culture of slavery be added to the feminist film theory and criticism to account for the differences between black feminists and white feminists.

I find aspects of Mulvey's male gaze concept problematic, mainly because, in my opinion, matters are rarely as black and white and unchanging (e.g. men are *always* active and women are *always* passive) as the theory seems to suggest. In line with scholars such as Rich (1990 [1978]), I also think the spectator has more power and agency in interpreting and identifying with the film and its characters than what Mulvey implies. In addition, Mulvey's theory appears rather obdurate, but as Hendricks (2013: 14) suggests, the gaze is not static but "has the possibility to change and to evolve". Furthermore, I do not completely agree with Kaplan's argument that in

order for the female character to be the initiator of action in film she must inevitably lose her femininity: while this may be true in some films, I find there are plenty of examples where the female characters are strong and active yet still possess traditional feminine characteristics, such as kindness and sensibility (for example, Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*[4]). Nevertheless, while I would not take the male gaze theory completely at its face value, I find it is useful to keep in mind considering the current study, specifically when looking at the more technical side of filmmaking, in other words the camera angles that are used when filming the female characters, since the theory suggests these are also designed to objectify women to appeal to specifically the heterosexual male spectator. I will explain the detailed applications of Mulvey's male gaze theory to the current study in chapter 3.2.

As was established at the beginning of this chapter, I have given here a rather concise overview of the most relevant issues of feminist film theory and feminist film criticism considering the current study. The psychoanalytic aspects – which originate from Freudian and Lacanian thinking – of the theories have not been dealt with in detail here because the current study draws on discourse analysis, narrative and textual analyses as well as film analysis for its methods, rather than psychology. (I will specify the methodology of this study in more detail in chapter 3.2). For the purposes of the current study, feminist film theory functions as spectacles through which the films and the female characters are analyzed, providing context and a theoretical framework on which to build the analysis.

2.3 Women in comic books: a brief history

Since the films that are being analyzed in the present study all derive their characters and plots from original comic books, it is useful, in order to better understand the context of the film characters, to have a brief look at the history of comic books here,

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[4] See, e.g. Early, F. H. (2001). Staking her claim: Buffy the vampire slayer as transgressive woman warrior. *Journal of Popular Culture 35(3)*, 11-27. http://search.proquest.com/docview/195369281?accountid=11774

with emphasis on the history of the female comic book characters. According to Reynolds (1992: 8), the costumed superhero came into existence in June 1938 with Superman's first appearance in print, and his success paved the way for characters such as Batman and Wonder Woman. America's entry into World War II had a great impact on the superhero comic books, giving the superheroes new enemies with real-life counterparts, as well as giving birth to the iconic, Nazi-fighting patriotic superhero Captain America. Wonder Woman was also introduced at this time, and her character could be seen reflecting the emerging role of women during wartime (Guevara-Flanagan 2012). This was the so-called Golden Age of superhero comics, which lasted up to the late 1940s. After the war, the popularity of superhero comics sank a little, but the two greatest comic book houses, DC Comics and Marvel, continued to expand their list of superhero characters and comics starting from the mid-1950s, introducing many new characters as well as reviving some of the old Golden Age characters (Reynolds 1992: 9). In the 1960s and early 1970s, Marvel dominated the comic book scene with new titles that were more in tune with the "real world", although DC still remained leader in superhero comic book sales with Batman and Superman on the top of the sales list. Currently though, Marvel is the leading comic book publisher with nine of the 2014's top ten comics (Diamond Comic Distributors 2015).

Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 168) note that the comic books of pre-1960s were "incredibly sexist in their portrayal of women", and that the only female characters wielding any true power and intelligence were the "femmes fatales" trying to seduce the heroes from the "straight and narrow". Weida (2011: 101) identifies that many female superhero characters share similar stereotypical "Hollywoodesque aesthetic" characterized by slender yet curvaceous physical appearance, great hair, and Caucasianness, with often tight and revealing clothing. She (ibid.: 100), however, further points out that, interestingly, it is in fact the male superheroes' appearances that transgress gender norms by "juxtaposing muscular, masculine bodies with flamboyant, colorful, and form-fitting attire usually more typical of feminine fashion". According to Madrid (2009: 246), the superheroines were presented as pure virgins even though they were

often dressed as whores: the women wore seductive attires when in disguise and flirted shamelessly with men when in their superhero identity, but in their everyday identities they were expected to be virtuous and proper. In other words, these women could never be both a noble hero and a sexual female. The villainesses, however, were freed from the sexual boundaries set by the society, and they were represented as following through with their seductive advances, which "further established the connection between illicit sexuality and evil". The message was that powerful and intriguing women could be sexual, but it also meant that they were bad (ibid.: 249).

Indeed, Madrid (2009) also notes that any power that the women of comic books have is often overshadowed by their hypersexualized[5] images, but he also notes that although objectifying, the images can also be seen as a source of power. There was, for example, one strong female superhero that emerged in the 1940s: (the above-mentioned) Wonder Woman. Even though the Wonder Woman comic books often included images of bondage and showed Wonder Woman in oppressive illustrations, and her use of whips and chains was associated with the image of the dominatrix, the character was still seen as a powerful feminist character who was able to free herself from her oppressors instead of needing a male hero to save her (Guevara-Flanagan 2012, Reynolds 1992: 34). Wonder Woman not only rescued fellow women, but also taught them (quite revolutionarily at that time) to stand up for themselves, as is seen in the following quote by Wonder Woman: "Earth girls can stop evil when they refuse to be dominated by evil men" (Madrid 2009: 42). No wonder then that many regarded Wonder Woman as a feminist symbol of female power (Guevara-Flanagan 2012).

Madrid (2009) relates that while the idea of superheroes was and continues to be that of an ordinary human being elevating into greatness, the female heroes are often not allowed to reach their full potential, thus being given weaker powers than their male counterparts as well as positions of lesser significance (as was the case when Wonder

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[5] Hypersexuality, as defined by Smith (2008), "refers to an overemphasis on attractiveness and sexuality by way of clothing (i.e. alluring attire) and body proportions (i.e. uncharacteristically small waist, hourglass figure, thinness)".

Woman joined the Justice League – a group of superheroes working together – and was only allowed to serve as the group's secretary (Madrid ibid.: 49)). Indeed, the fact that many original comic book female characters' names contained the title "girl", such as Hawk*girl*, Invisible *Girl*, Marvel *Girl*, and Rocket*girl,* seems to underline the difference in position, as "girl" brings about connotations of adolescence, naivety, and even childish helplessness (compared to the male characters, who are most often *men* rather than boys: Bat*man*, Super*man*, Iron *Man*, Spider-*Man*, and so on). Madrid (2009: 21) also argues that comics represented an idea that for a female superhero to be successful in fighting crime and beating the bad guys, she would have to be absolved of any traditional feminine emotions of compassion and mercy.

In the 1950s the comics industry adopted a self-censoring Comics Code as a response to Congressional hearings on the relations between comics and juvenile delinquency, banning explicit violence, sex and gore, as well as representations of triumphant antisocial behavior from the comics (Reynolds 1992: 8). Due to this ethics code, which also dictated that women should be drawn realistically, and which prohibited nudity and any indecent exposure, women were pushed to the sidelines in comics, and, for example, Batman was seen constantly telling Batwoman how incompetent she was, and how a woman could not possibly succeed in fighting crime the way a man would (Guevara-Flanagan 2012; Madrid 2009: 60). Therefore, instead of drawing women realistically and placing them in decent positions, most of the comic book female characters faded away by the mid-50s (Madrid 2009: 29). The end of World War II also meant that women were expected to return to their roles as homemakers, and this change was also seen affecting, for example, the Wonder Woman comics. Wonder Woman's adventures began to revolve around romance, she was seen carried in the arms of a man as opposed to the earlier scenes in which Wonder Woman carried the man, and there were also scenes in which Wonder Woman positioned herself inferior to male heroes, questioning her own abilities and self worth in comparison to the male heroes (Guevara-Flanagan 2012). Comic books also held onto the idea for a long time that women were better as assistants to the male heroes rather than working on their

own – an idea that comes across well in stories in which the female characters set out to rescue the male heroes, yet end up needing rescuing by the male heroes after getting caught by the villain (Madrid 2009: 12).

The manner in which women were portrayed in comics clearly reflected society's ideals, as has already been mentioned earlier in regards to Wonder Woman. Another intriguing example in this respect is that of the Batwoman, who, unlike Wonder Woman, was the product of an era that discouraged women from pursuing careers. As Madrid (2009: 60-61) describes, she was used as a pawn in Batman's schemes, but she was never regarded as an equal member of the Batman and Robin team. In fact, she was created as a love interest for Batman to ward off claims that Batman was homosexual. Lois Lane, a journalist and Superman's love interest, was also affected by the society's predominant ideal of a stay-at-home housewife. Once ambitious reporter, emancipated, and headstrong, Lois's career ambitions were cooled down and her true ambition was now to become Mrs. Superman. She often needed rescuing, and especially in the Superman TV-series Lois Lane was portrayed as the damsel in distress who waited for Superman to rescue her (Madrid 2009: 65-67). Weida (2011: 101) also discusses the undoing of certain female characters in comics, meaning that the importance and significance of a female character has been diminished or completely denied in some comic book storylines. For example, the *Spider-Man* comics contain storylines where Spider-Man's marriage to Mary Jane has been removed, and when Batman's only female-Robin[6] companion was written off, she was denied a memorial unlike her male predecessors.

Fast-forwarding to more recent years, the 1990s was the era of "babes": the women of comic books were modeled after supermodels and they were often drawn in fashion model poses (Madrid 2009: 274-275). The characters were drawn at the expense of their personalities; in other words, looks became the most important feature in them. The

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[6] The title of Robin is passed down from character to character, i.e. Robin can and has been portrayed by multiple different characters, mostly male.

background stories of some of the new female superheroines also differed from the earlier: the proper and decent secretaries turned into foul-mouthed strippers and homicidal killers (Madrid 2009: 279-281). As these new bold female characters started to emerge on the comic shelves, the old superheroines needed to change as well, and even Wonder Woman began to wear a thong to improve sales. As Madrid (2009: 283) describes, the situation was ironical since the comic book shelves featured more titles starring women, but they were so "highly sexualized that it seemed to cancel out any of their power". Gresh and Weinberg (2002: 168-169) also acknowledge that as society's views of women have changed, so has the amount of women depicted in comics, but they are somewhat critical concerning the way in which women are still depicted: in their view, 'empowered' seems to be synonymous with 'half-naked', and many female characters still appear to be "beautiful bimbos in thongs".

One cannot write about women in comic books without mentioning the term "women in refrigerators", first coined by comic book creator Gail Simone in 1999. The term gets its name from a specific comic in which the main superhero protagonist finds his girlfriend brutally murdered and stuffed in a refrigerator (Scott 2013). Simone compiled a list of female comic book characters that have been "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" (Simone 1999). This maiming, killing, or otherwise harming of the female characters was often done in order to further the male protagonist's story arc, or to simply prove a point – as was the case in the 1988 comic book, *The Killing Joke,* in which the arch enemy of Batman, the Joker, sets out to prove that one bad day can make any good man go insane, and he paralyses Barbara Gordon from the waist down in order to influence Batman and Commissioner Gordon, Barbara's father (Vanier 2014). Barbara is therefore used as an instrument for the Joker's malevolence. Vanier (2014) points out that while male heroes are also maimed and harmed in many comic books, the difference is that in most cases the male heroes are returned to their full power quite quickly, which is not the case with depowered women: Barbara, for example, does not get back her ability to walk. Furthermore, Vanier says that the problem is not in the violence against the characters per se, but it becomes problematic when the violence is

distributed unequally, and when it is used against the female characters as a narrative tool solely to "push male characters to the edge, to test their mettle, or to break their spirits".

The issue of female representation in comics has been much discussed in the industry in recent years, and for example Diane Nelson, the president of DC Comics, was reported saying that improving female visibility for both female characters and creators is one of the top priorities for the company (Ching 2014). Marvel also decided to take one of their best known characters, the mighty Norse god Thor, and make him a woman in a new series, emphasizing that they want to target women and girls as readers (Barnett 2014). In the last three decades or so, Madrid (2009: 155-157) argues heroines have been granted more agency, and that women have become more than mere sidekicks: they have become heroes in their own right, independent from their male counterparts. Furthermore, Gray (2011, as cited in Stoltzfus 2014: 22) argues that while modern day comics may still not portray women as they truly are, some are beginning to offer more diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, and personalities.

2.4 Women in cinema: a brief history

Historically speaking women have held a very dismal status in the film industry, especially in the 1930s through the 1950s (Giannetti 2005: 454). According to Giannetti (ibid.), out of thousands of movies produced by the studios, only a handful were directed by women and virtually none were produced by women. Although nowadays there are more women in the upper echelons of the industry than in the 1930s - 1950s, for example the number of female directors to male directors tells a gravely unbalanced story: female directors comprised only 7% of all directors working on the top 250 grossing (American) films of 2014 (Lauzen 2015b: 1). Furthermore, Lauzen (ibid.) reports that altogether women comprised only 17% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 grossing American films in 2014. That leaves 83% of the film industry to male dominion. It is this

male leadership that, for example, Giannetti (2005: 456) and Stoltzfus (2014: 3-4) argue leads to women not being able to tell their own stories as the images are mainly controlled by men.

Women have, however, held a degree of prominence in the field of acting, but this has not been without problems either (Giannetti 2005: 454-455). In the 20th century big-studio era female actresses rarely received bigger salaries than the male stars, a pattern that still persists today: Forbes.com (2014) reports that in 2014 the highest earning actress Sandra Bullock earned approximately 51 million dollars, whereas the highest earning actor the same year, Robert Downey Jr (the star of one of the films in this study, *Iron Man 3*) made an estimated 75 million dollars. Altogether the top ten highest earning actors in the Forbes's list made an estimated $419 million while the top ten actresses made a combined $226 million - just little over half of the male actors' combined income. Giannetti also says that especially in the 1930s through to 1950s female actresses usually had shorter careers because they were thought to be "too old" for leading roles once they were past forty, while male stars such as Gary Grant and John Wayne got leading roles still in their sixties. Often these older actors were then paired with young actresses half their age. Actresses such as Bette Davis or Joan Crawford who managed to get leading roles after their forties played mostly "grotesque caricatures" whose main purpose was to be laughed at (Giannetti 2005: 455). Present-day female actresses, however, seem to have longer careers than their predecessors, and nowadays we have actresses such as Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren, Judi Dench, and Ellen Burstyn – among many, many others – who continue to play challenging characters and make critically acclaimed as well as commercially successful films long after their forties.

Traditionally during the "golden age of Hollywood cinema" (roughly from the 1930s through 1950s) female characters were put in the sidelines where they would cheer for the male hero and wait passively to be rescued or claimed by the hero as "his reward" (Giannetti 2005: 456). Like in the comic books, in cinema certain characteristics were regarded as more "masculine" – intellect, independence, ambition, and sexual

confidence to name a few – and were usually presented as "inappropriate and unseemly in women" (ibid.). There were certain genres that were considered suitable for women to act in: love stories, domestic family dramas, romantic comedies, and musicals. The female characters were most often portrayed as concerned with either getting or holding on to a man, and raising children. Whenever a woman was confronted with a conflict between her career and her husband, marriage was presented as the better and wiser choice (Giannetti 2005: 457). If the female character was not presented as a dutiful wife or a daughter, she was typically presented as a hypersexualized object the male characters could lust over, as was the case, for example, in the 1962 film *Lolita* (Scott and Dargis 2014). Smith (2008: 1) summarizes that the portrayals of women can undermine their presence in films by "being 'hyper-attractive' or 'hypersexual' and/or passive". She demands a shift from "creating females as adornment, enticement, or with inclination to romance as the main or exclusive personality trait or motivator" (ibid.).

Scott and Dargis (2014) argue, however, that the picture of "girlhood" – a term they derive from the 2014 acclaimed film *Boyhood*, which follows the life of a single boy from the age of six to eighteen – has become increasingly diverse in cinema, including complex array of identities ranging from "bold revisions of age-old archetypes" to "brave new heroines". Scott and Dargis (ibid.) say that the new female characters challenge the age-old stereotypes of women waiting to be rescued, by women "saving themselves and their worlds, too". In recent years there has been a notable rise in films featuring a female character who can throw punches and bring down the bad guys; girls and women who are more than sidekicks and eye candy (Scott and Dargis 2014). Such films include – but are not limited to – the *Hunger Games* saga, the *Divergent* trilogy, *Hanna*, and *Kick-Ass*, which is an interesting film from the superhero perspective as it portrays more "realistic" superheroes (i.e. without god-like or supernatural powers and abilities). In *Kick-Ass* films Chloë Grace Moretz plays the fearless Hit Girl, a foul mouthed and combat thirsty teenager trained by her vigilante father, Big Daddy. What Scott and Dargis (2014) point out about Hit Girl's character is

that it taps into yet another myth about female characters: that women's violence could only be explained by "narrowly defined motives of self-defense and revenge" (like in films such as *Thelma & Louise* or *Kill Bill*), and the pleasure of action for its own sake is reserved only for male characters.

Even the well-established stereotype of Disney princesses has begun to experience some updates into the current century (Scott and Dargis 2014). Whereas the traditional Disney princess – Snow White, the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and so on – could be described as passively waiting for her prince to come and save her from her current state of affairs (for example, a sleeping curse as is the case with both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, or the tyranny of an evil stepmother with Cinderella), the "new" princess is a fierce tomboy who wants to be in charge of her own destiny (for example, Merida in *Brave*) and thirsts for adventure and new experiences (like Rapunzel in *Tangled*). The "modern" princess does not necessarily long for a prince at all (again an example of this would be *Brave*'s Merida, who refuses to be wed off by her parents), or at least it seems finding the prince is not the main focus but rather just an added bonus (in *Frozen*, I would argue it seems the main focus is on the relationship between sisters Anna and Elsa, and in Anna trying to help Elsa come to terms with her powers). In addition, Disney's *Maleficent* - a live action origin story for the mean fairy who casts the curse over princess Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* – breaks one fundamental stereotype known from the traditional princess stories: when Aurora falls under Maleficent's curse, the handsome prince's kiss does not break the curse like it does in the 1959 animated film, and instead it is Maleficent's motherly kiss on Aurora's forehead that awakens the princess (Scott and Dargis 2014). Despite these changes as regards content, the biased portrayal of appearance still prevails, and Smith (2008: 1) states that in animated films, females are depicted almost exclusively as hypersexualized and thin. Smith (2008: 7), however, also observed in her study that the "completely helpless damsel in distress" seems to be less popular nowadays, and instead female protagonists are shown in more physically active roles and acting heroically.

In a study by Smith, Choueiti and Pieper (2014a), in which they investigated female characters in popular films across eleven countries, they found that gender was related to the genre of the film, and thus action/adventure films depicted fewer female characters than other film genres. In their study, only 23% of speaking characters were female in action/adventure genre. This seems plausible considering the current study, in which there are only about a dozen speaking female characters altogether across the five films. Although some say that the depiction of women is improving (for example, Scott and Dargis (2014), as cited above), another study by Smith, Choueiti and Pieper (2014b: 9), however, revealed that women still function very much as adornments and eye candy in films: women are more likely than men to be shown in sexualized attire (i.e. tight or revealing clothing), women are more likely to be shown in partial or full nudity, and women are also more likely to be referenced in regard to their physical attractiveness than men.

Female characters being used as plot devices[7] in both film and TV is also not unheard of. The term "women in refrigerators", which was coined by Gail Simone and originally referred to the way women were treated in comic books (see chapter 2.3) has found its way in the discussion about women in films as well[8]. There are plenty of examples of female characters being killed or raped in films to motivate action in the male character (Tasker 1993: 16), for example, in *Gladiator* the death of the male protagonist's wife and child motivate his vengeance tale, and in *The Dark Knight* the death of Bruce Wayne's love interest Rachel Dawes drives Bruce deeper into his identity as Batman and also turns Dawes's boyfriend Harvey Dent into the villain Two Face. Especially in action films women have traditionally been fought over and avenged rather than women fighting or doing the avenging themselves (Tasker 1993: 17). Tasker (ibid.) also argues

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[7] Plot device is an object or a character whose purpose is to drive the story forward, maintain its flow, or resolve situations within it (TV tropes n.d.).
[8] See, for example, Mendelson, S. (2014).
http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2014/05/05/amazing-spider-man-2-and-its-self-sabotaging-plot-twist/

that in these "threatened object" roles women have been significant, albeit passive, narrative figures.

In action genre femininity has traditionally been associated with weakness and vulnerability, as well as sexual oppression, and whilst women have usually played the feminine roles, a male character could also assume the role of a "threatened object" (Tasker 1993: 17). By the 1990s, and in the 1990s, quite many strong and active heroines emerged who defied the stereotypes of women in action films: Sigourney Weaver's character Ripley in *Alien* (1979) was one of the very first action heroines who did not submit to passiveness, Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor in *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2* (1991) showed that a muscular strong woman could also be a mother, and Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis in *Thelma & Louise* (1991) paved way to female centered roadtrip/journey films. Together these films and their female characters began to broaden the set of roles and narrative possibilities for women in action films especially (Tasker 1993: 18).

According to Brown (2004: 47-48), the reception of women in action films has, however, been complicated as critics debate whether tough women in action films are merely performing masculinity, or becoming "masculine proxies", instead of embodying legitimate female heroism. The fundamental question intriguing feminist film critics studying the modern action heroine seems to be whether the tough women of action films represent a position of empowerment or whether they are "further fetishized as dangerous sex objects" (Brown 2004: 47). As Brown (ibid.) explains the dilemma:

> On the one hand, she represents a potentially transgressive figure capable of expanding the popular perception of women's roles and abilities; on the other, she runs the risk of reinscribing strict gender binaries and of being nothing more than sexist window-dressing for the predominantly male audience.

Considering how predominantly masculine and male the stereotypical action hero – embodied by the likes of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Steven Segal to name but a few – has been in films (and superheroes in comic books for that matter),

it is not surprising that action heroines are often interpreted as "figurative males" (Brown 2004: 50). This description is in fact quite obvious in some films, and Brown (ibid.: 52) mentions films such as *G.I. Jane* and *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, where the central plot seems to be the transformation of their female protagonists into "intentionally transgressive, masculinized figures".

Brown (2004: 49, 52), however, offers alternative interpretations: the tough action heroine performs both femininity and masculinity and she is a transgressive character because she utilizes traits from both sides of the gender divide, thus disproving what are considered the appropriate gender roles for men and women. "She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object" (Brown 2004: 52). He (ibid.: 50, 64-69) also argues that every action heroine exhibits a symbolic function of the dominatrix, a characteristic that seems to originate from the so-called Bad Girl comic books of the 1990s where scantily dressed fantasy women were fetishized with large weapons to attract adolescent male readership (although the notion of the heroine as a dominatrix is nothing new as the analogy was quite obvious with Wonder Woman already in the 1940s; see more on this in chapter 2.3). Brown argues that the hypersexualized female body can just as readily be coded as a weapon as it can be as passive eye candy. It is precisely this combination of the ability to shoot weapons and kick ass and the female sexuality and threat of seduction that, according to Brown (2004: 65-66), makes the action heroines "dangerous in a way that male characters can never be".

2.5 Previous research on superhero films

As was mentioned in chapter 1, to my knowledge, not that many (academic) studies have been done on the more recent superhero films, or studies that focus solely on superhero films and their female characters, despite the representation of the female characters in these films being a talking point especially among feminist bloggers and

social media users[9]. However, in this chapter I will discuss a few studies conducted in recent years on superhero films and their female characters that will provide the current study with some relevant starting points for conducting similar analysis and points of possible comparison as well.

The first study presented here is by Bogarosh (2013), who looked at the top-grossing films of the 21st century and focused on (mostly) patriarchal ideologies, assumptions and values surrounding women in them. The study makes use of communication/media studies, cultural studies, and film studies, as well as textual analysis (ibid.: 11), and therefore benefits the present study on how to approach and conduct feminist film research. Bogarosh looks at 36 films that she divided according to genre into three categories: animated films, action films, and sci-fi/fantasy films. Therefore, she does not focus specifically on superhero films, but she does touch upon few superhero films in relation to the action genre, providing interesting discussion on their characters. Her analysis is divided into three themes and stereotypes that she observed most frequently in the films: i) heterosexual romance, marriage and family; ii) violence and victimization, and iii) leadership and power, and the stereotypes that were identified were the princess, the damsel, and the sidekick.

In relation to the first theme, Bogarosh (2013: 20-36) observed that especially in animated films a prominent theme was "happily ever after", which, for women, was achieved by heterosexual romance, marriage and family. The films did not provide any other alternatives for women to achieve this happy ending and fulfillment in life; the only way was to find true heterosexual love, get married and have children. She (ibid.: 36-38) also noted that the animated films in her study lack female leaders, and that women are presented always as the supporting character and never the protagonist. The lack of female leaders ties into the second theme of violence and victimization, as female characters in animated films are often, according to Bogarosh (ibid.: 38-39),

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[9] See e.g. Shackelford, A. (2013). http://everydayfeminism.com/2013/11/female-characters-superhero-films/ (accessed 16 April 2016) and Thomas, J. (2014). https://www.the-newshub.com/film-and-tv/women-in-superhero-films-1 (accessed 16 April 2016).

portrayed as helpless and passive, waiting to be rescued by the male hero. This idea of women as "damsels in distress" extends in Bogarosh's analysis to action films as well. According to Bogarosh (ibid.: 44), action films normalize violence against women and "others" women by placing priority on masculinity and action. Bogarosh (ibid.: 45-47) discusses in length the character of Mary Jane Watson, the female lead from the *Spider-Man* trilogy from 2002 to 2007. In the films Mary Jane always seems to be in need of rescue, and is saved by Spider-Man multiple times. Mary Jane is also often used as leverage by different villains to lure Spider-Man into traps. The character does little to nothing in order to rescue herself; instead she waits for Spider-Man to arrive. In addition to requiring rescue more often than not, Mary Jane also falls victim to emotional abuse from the men in her life and encounters types of sexual violence multiple times.

Bogarosh (2013: 47) makes an interesting point regarding the persisting damsel-in-distress phenomenon:

> By continually placing the woman in the position of damsel-in-distress, the films set the stage not only for men being seen as the great protector of women, but as the rightful controller of women. After all, if the women had just listened to the men in their life in the first place, then many of these situations would have been avoided.

Again with the example of Mary Jane, Bogarosh (ibid.: 48) demonstrates how women are often denied agency: in the second *Spider-Man* film, Peter/Spider-Man makes the decision that he and Mary Jane cannot be together because it is not safe for her, but she is not given a choice or say in the matter. Similarly in the first *Iron Man* film, the male hero Tony Stark exhibits control over the female lead Pepper Potts by controlling her time (as she is his assistant) and even saying out loud that he does not like Pepper having plans outside her work (Bogarosh 2013: 51). Bogarosh (ibid.: 48) also argues that violence in action films normalizes violence against women, as seen in the third *Spider-Man* film: Peter – the supposed hero of the film – hits Mary Jane in a rage, but there are no repercussions to his action in the film and in the end he even gets her back. Bogarosh

(ibid.) states: "The lack of repercussions for his act of domestic violence serves to normalize violence against women even further".

Bogarosh (2013: 48-51) also points out the promotion of hypermasculinity in action films, saying that "[t]he hegemonic masculinity presented in action films is one of extreme violence and aggression". In relation to hypermasculinity and controlling women, Bogarosh (ibid.: 51-52) mentions that action films tend to objectify women, showing men that not only is that kind of behavior acceptable, it is in fact an expected characteristic of masculinity. Tony in the second *Iron Man* film, for example, refers to a new female employee by saying, "I want one", rendering her a mere object. Bogarosh (ibid.: 52-54) also states that in action films especially, the camera often focuses on specific female body parts, diminishing the importance of the woman's personality and intelligence – a clear instance of objectification.

One of the stereotypes that Bogarosh (2013: 74) identified was "the sidekick", and she discusses the stereotype as strongly linked to the third theme of leadership and power in the films. She (ibid.: 76) argues that even strong, intelligent, and brave female characters are denied leadership positions and ultimately play the sidekick for the male hero, which she exemplified with the *Harry Potter* film series and the character of Hermione. Even though Hermione is portrayed as smart (usually smarter than Harry), brave, caring, and self-sufficient, she is still a secondary character - a sidekick to Harry. Furthermore, Bogarosh (ibid.: 77) points out that the character of Hermione is often mocked for her intelligence, attention to detail, and interest in educating herself. At one point Ron – the other main male character besides Harry – even calls her "brilliant, but scary", suggesting that intelligent women are intimidating and abnormal. In many science fiction/fantasy films that Bogarosh (ibid.: 80, 83) discusses there often appears to be one "token female" character who is shown to be in a leadership position among men, for example, elven queen Galadriel in *Lord of the Rings* and Princess Leia, or her mother senator Padame, in the *Star Wars* films, but their leadership positions are, in fact, only for show and they do not actually wield much power in the films. The question of

female power and leadership is an intriguing one in Bogarosh's study, and one that I am interested in observing to some extent in the superhero films of my own study as well.

Stoltzfus's (2014) study takes a slightly different approach with a feminist political economic point of view to the female representations in DC and Marvel film adaptations in an attempt to shed light on the decision-making process that goes into the making of a comic book film. She (2014: 3) argues that the female representations on the movie screens (including the ones Bogarosh (2013) identified) are the product of media oligopoly and that the heavily male leadership of these big media conglomerates is the reason female characters are assigned into the background to act as either maternal figures or femme fatales. Stoltzfus (ibid.: 5-6) further argues that the big media companies - Time Warner and Disney which own DC and Marvel, respectively - tend to repeat successful patterns, in other words, they are more willing to put out movies that fit into the same familiar formula and follow similar characters (i.e. white male heroes) than to take risks with female led superhero action movies, especially since the few female centered movies such as *Catwoman* (2004) and *Elektra* (2005) did not fare very well at the box office (although Stoltzfus points out that these two films do not exactly compare to the male led superhero films such as *Batman Begins* (2005) since only the combined budget of the first two would equal to the latter one's alone). By doing so, Stoltzfus (ibid.: 7-8) argues these large media corporations repeatedly circulate certain ideologies to the audiences watching the films.

More specifically, Stoltzfus (2014: 38) analyzed the top ten films in the superhero genre by using both political economy and textual analysis methodologies. She used the textual analysis to look at the ideologies portrayed in the films (a given character's dialogue, costume design, and overall character development), and she was interested in exploring whether superheroines are treated equally in their portrayals to their male counterparts by the film studios owned and directed by big conglomerates. She then analyzed the ideologies she identified from the point of view of feminist political

economy. Stoltzfus (ibid.: 73) found that, unsurprisingly, the lead characters are always male and Caucasian. Furthermore, Stoltzfus (ibid.: 80) found that few women in the films were shown capable of taking care of themselves and not one female character was shown to have more agency than her male counterpart (as exemplified by female characters needing constant rescuing by the male heroes), resulting in a conclusion that "their absence would not considerably alter the plot". Stoltzfus (ibid.: 81) also states that the films promote ideologies which dictate what masculinity and femininity should be like:

> For men, the ideal is a muscular, heterosexual white male who believes in patriotism, saving damsels, and physically fighting bad guys. For women, the ideal is presented as a thin yet muscular female with wide hips and a large bust who assists men and uses her femininity and sexuality as a weapon.

She (ibid.: 74-75) argues that as the films in her study are produced by only four different companies, it is only their patriarchal ideologies that get distributed to audiences. Stoltzfus (ibid.) explains that the way the big production studios decide which comic book characters get a film adaptation is to look at which comic book series and different plots in the original source material sell well, thus making them ripe for adaptation. This, however, does not fully explain why studios are still reluctant to produce movies with a female lead character, since for example, in November 2014 the fifth best-selling comic book was *Spider-Woman* (Marvel) (Comichron n.d.a), and *Harley Quinn* (DC) was the seventh best-selling comic book in December 2013 (Comichron n.d.b).

Stoltzfus identified four main themes in the films she analyzed: the Madonna/whore dichotomy of women, hypermasculinity and demotion of female masculinity, men as advocates of consumerism, and women as expendable plot devices. The first theme suggests that the women in the films fall into two character types: they are either the nursing, innocent damsels in distress, or dangerous, deceitful vixens that deploy their sexuality to sway the brave men from their mission (Stoltzfus 2014: 82). The second theme discusses how male masculinity in the films is emphasized – even exaggerated – and considered the ideal, whereas masculine females are often portrayed as villains and

undesirable (ibid.: 85-86). The image of hypermasculinity in these films consists of strong white men with masculine features, having considerable muscles, and resorting to hand to hand combat, and if a male character falls short of these characteristics, he is rendered feminine and often a villain, as exemplified by the character of Loki in *The Avengers* (ibid.). The third theme suggests that characters such as Bruce Wayne/Batman and Tony Stark/Iron Man encourage consumerism by the example that they set: both of these characters are rich and have the resources to build their own weapons and gadgets that they need to fight crime, whereas women are not portrayed in this manner – they may use weapons, but most often the weapons are given to them by the men (Stoltzfus ibid.: 87-89). The fourth and final theme Stoltzfus (ibid.: 89-90) discusses claims that women function as mere plot devices, helping the male characters to reach their full potential by encouraging them verbally or causing them to act by needing rescuing or even dying. However, she (2014: 93) acknowledges the limitations to her analysis, as she did not conduct a very in-depth analysis of the different themes.

In conclusion, Stoltzfus (2014: 94-96) argues that gender is represented very stereotypically in superhero films – men are strong, aggressive and dominating whereas women are sexualized, in need of saving, less aggressive and "use emotions to fight their battles" – and this is due to the political economic climate which is first and foremost driven by profit: as many of the storylines adapted to film are based on old comic book stories, so are the gender portrayals in them, and since the studios have noticed that certain adaptations make more money, they want to keep the profitable formula and new, possibly boundary-breaking gender portrayals never reach the big screen.

Hendricks (2013: 25-26), however, argues in her study that the film adaptations of such comic book characters as Hit-Girl in *Kick-Ass* (2010) (see also Scott and Dargis 2014), Knives Chau in *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010) and Mystique in *X-Men: The First Class*

represent postfeminist[10] discourse by challenging gender stereotypes and becoming self-aware of their "postfeminist positioning". She (2013: 26) argues that the three characters reflect the "current anxieties of postfeminism [i.e. the fallacy of the ideal (ibid.: 7)] while offering non-traditional and complex depictions of the Super Sidechick[11]". Hendricks explains that, for example, Hit-Girl defies gender stereotypes in that she is foul-mouthed and violent, unafraid of danger and physical pain. Although she is not the main protagonist of the film, she becomes "the only protagonist that matters" for a period of time when she rescues her father and the main protagonist Dave: the camera assumes her point of view as she shoots her way through the bad guys (Hendricks 2013: 41). Hendricks (2013: 43), however, points out that although Hit-Girl gains this moment of power and is all in all represented as capable, the film resumes to familiar composition as Dave rescues Hit-Girl in the end. Hendricks (2013: 45) concludes:

> Within a postfeminist context, Hit-Girl can be viewed as embodying progress and a promise of a wildly violent and adept hero (who just happens to be a girl). The potential of the character isn't quite realized and fails to break away from the traditionally accepted action genre. (…) This failure at the end of the film taints Hit-Girl's actions throughout the narrative and instead of the lasting impression of a strong, young, female hero, the final images of Hit-Girl in costume depict her in a fetal position in the arms of the traditional male hero.

Regarding the character of Knives Chau, Hendricks (2013: 62-63) argues that she represents a feminist journey in which the character becomes aware of the feminine ideals of consumerism and the false promises that, for example, advertisements and magazines make and eventually rejects them. Throughout the film Knives changes her appearance and likes to better suit Scott's (her crush) desires, but in the end she chooses not to adapt to male desires, thus rejecting patriarchy (ibid.). Neither *Kick-Ass* nor *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* can be compared to superhero films by Marvel and DC in success

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[10] Hendricks (2013: 6-7) perceives postfeminism as a movement in which "the need for distinctions and allowances are unnecessary. From this view, the postfeminist world is a place where females exist in a completely equal environment as their male counterparts and any struggles attached to their sex are immaterial."

[11] To belong into the Super Sidechick category, Hendricks (2013: 80) states, "a secondary girl character must either 1. Exhibit violent tendencies that surpass her male counterparts (acting); 2. Realize the limitations of the girl power movement through self awareness (thinking); or 3. Embody the adaptability that modern feminism requires (becoming)."

or in the marketing and production machinery behind the making of the films. Compare, for example, the estimated budget of 30 million dollars of *Kick-Ass* to the 250 million dollar budget of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (IMDb.com). Thus, considering Stoltzfus's (2014) argument that big conglomerates act as the gate-keepers in what kinds of representations of women make it to the big screen, it can be argued that it is because *Kick-Ass* and *Scott Pilgrim* are based on less-known, more independent comic books and produced by smaller film companies that the film adaptations include more boundary-breaking gender portrayals.

In her analysis of the character of Mystique, Hendricks (2013: 65) describes her as addressing issues of gender performativity and identity. Hendricks (ibid.) argues that Mystique, who has shape-shifting mutant abilities, "represents a female who can quite literally be anything and anyone while choosing to resist the ideals of hegemonic beauty". The character is othered as a female because her true form (blue, scaly skin), while clearly the body of a woman, does not connote desirability according to the traditional patriarchal ideals of femininity (Hendricks 2013: 68-69). In order to fit in to the society, Mystique is encouraged to adopt a traditionally attractive human female form, or even to cure her mutation altogether. In the end, she chooses not to hide her true self, thus refusing to conform to the patriarchal ideals and instead "asserts her own agency" (ibid.: 74). Hendricks (ibid.: 70) also points out that, interestingly, although clearly shown naked multiple times in the film in her true from, Mystique resists Mulvey's male gaze as she is not positioned in sexualized ways: instead, she is framed head on without any glamourizing or pin-up positioning. In conclusion, Hendricks's study provides some very different views into the analysis of superhero female characters compared to the other studies discussed here, Bogarosh (2013) and Stoltzfus (2014). Although she would not go as far as calling any of the films and their female characters that she analyzed unproblematic, it appears she finds their portrayals encouragingly feminist and questioning "masculine views of what defines the feminine (Hendricks 2013: 81).

The final study presented here deals with violent female characters in action films. Gilpatric (2010) conducted a study on violent female action characters in cinema and, in addition to looking at gender stereotypes and female acts of violence, she looked at the demographic profile of action heroines. Her final data sample consisted of 112 blockbuster action films and 157 different VFACs (Violent Female Action Character), and she found that staggering 74.5% of the VFACs were white (which supports Bogarosh's (2013: 102) observation about the ethnic distribution in films in general), leaving 9.5% of the characters to represent African American, 9.5% Hispanic, 5.1% Asian, and 1.4% other ethnicities (Gilpatric 2010: 740). In addition, her results showed that over 90% of the VFACs were in their twenties and thirties, and over 60% were portrayed as employed and in a well-paying job – again consistent with Bogarosh's (ibid.) claim that films give a biased image of women in society in terms of ethnicity, age, and social class.

In line with the studies discussed above, Gilpatric (2010: 743) also found that most VFACs were assuming the role of a sidekick to the male hero and that they were also frequently shown having a romantic relationship with him. Similarly to, for example, Stoltzfus (2014: 89-90), Gilpatric suggests that her findings indicate that female action characters are included in the stories to "support and promote the actions of the male hero" – to be the damsel-in-distress so that the male hero can overcome obstacles. She (ibid.: 744) also points out the self-sacrificing women in her study, in other words women who sacrifice their own lives to save the male hero, or to end their own tragic lives, and then die in his arms. Gilpatric argues that these self-sacrificing women "illustrate the extreme end of submissive affection and feminine stereotypes shown too often in popular action movies".

This concludes my overview into a few recent studies on female characters in superhero/action films that best seem to match the scope of the current study. The present study adds to the existing research in that it provides a different, more multifaceted point of view to the superhero films and their female characters, one that is

not focusing solely on what is "inherently bad" about the representations as seems to be the case in many previous studies. As I will also look at some similar aspects, such as visual appearance and the characters' actions, in my study it will be interesting to see whether related issues and themes come up in the analysis. The current study, however, will make note of the positive representations as well. In addition, the arrangement of my analysis will be character-based rather than theme-based, meaning that each character will be analyzed on its own in detail rather than analyzing the characters under certain fixed themes. My data also consists of a few more recent films than the films mentioned in these studies; therefore it might be possible that there are differences and possible improvements in representations.

In the next chapter I will explain in more detail the aims of this study, lay out the research questions, describe the methods of analysis, and briefly introduce the films and the main female characters I will analyze.

3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will introduce and explain the set-up of the current study. First, I will explain the aims and research questions. Second, I will introduce my data collecting methods and briefly introduce the data and the main characters this research focuses on. Finally, I will introduce and describe the analytical tools and approaches used in this study.

3.1 Aims and research questions

The purpose of this study is to look at the central female characters in five rather recently made comic book based film adaptations, and investigate how these female characters are represented. The topic for this study was chosen due to the immense popularity of the superhero film genre nowadays, as well as due to personal interest in these type of films and interest in looking at the films from the feminist point of view. As has been mentioned above, the ratio of female characters to male characters continues to be quite low in the action-adventure-scifi genre, and considering the stereotypical way women have been represented in this genre before (as was discussed in chapter 2.4), it is worthwhile to take an in-depth look at these select films and their major female characters to see whether the stereotypes, or otherwise biased representations, still persist, or have the representations changed – and if they have, in what ways, and has the change been for better or for worse?

The research questions that aim to fulfill the purpose of this study are therefore the following:

1. **How are the main female characters in the superhero comic book film adaptations represented through a) visual appearance and ethnicity, b) speech, and c) behavior?**
2. **How do the main female characters function and/or not function in the films' storylines?**

To answer the first research question, the visual appearance, ethnicity, speech, and behavior of the characters will be considered and analyzed. In regards to *visual appearance*, I will follow Smith, Choueiti and Pieper's (2014a: 8) footsteps and take into account the following attributes: sexually revealing clothing, nudity, thinness, and attractiveness. Smith, Choueiti and Pieper (ibid.) define sexually revealing clothing as tight, alluring, or revealing apparel, and they consider nudity to be "part or full exposure from mid chest to high upper thigh region". Thinness as one of the attributes is, in my opinion, important to consider as well, since my hypothesis is that almost all of the characters represent a very biased body image, which can lead to unhealthy body dissatisfaction especially among younger viewers. In Smith, Choueiti and Pieper's (ibid.) research, thinness was defined as "minimal amount of body fat and/or muscle". Attractiveness was measured according to verbal and/or nonverbal utterances that communicated the physical desirability of a character, in other words, for example, another character's explicit comments about a female character's physical appearance (Smith, Choueiti and Pieper 2014a: 8).

In addition to visual appearance, I will also make note of the *ethnicity* of the characters to see whether the films show ethnic diversity when representing women, or whether ethnicity is brought up in the films in any (other) way. In other words, I am interested in seeing whether there is any bias in ethnic representation, as the assumption concerning Hollywood films is that they represent a very white population. As regards *speech*, I am interested in looking at the way the female characters speak: how they speak (i.e. tone, pitch, style, and how they might change in different situations), how much dialogue they have in relation to the other characters, and what they speak about (i.e. what kinds of topics they talk about with the other characters, what sort of topics they themselves initiate). The *Bechdel test*[12] will also be employed in analyzing the speech of the characters. This test states that in order to be considered gender equal, a film needs to have "(1) at least two named women in it (2) who talk to each other (3)

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[12] The test originates from a comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985) by Alison Bechdel. In the comic strip, two female characters are thinking about going to the cinema, and one of them says that she only goes to see films that satisfy the three requirements.

about something other than a man" (Bechdel Test Movie List N.d.). The test has gained some popularity among general discussion of films and feminist film studies, and has been used to some extent in research, see e.g. Micic (2015) and Dolan (2013).

Finally, I will pay attention to the *behavior* of the characters. By behavior I mean how the characters act around and interact with other characters, and do they, for example, use their femininity to their own advantage and if so, how. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995: 658), for instance, looked at such behavioral patterns in their study of cartoon characters as showing physical or verbal aggression, being the victim of physical and/or verbal aggression, asking for advice, showing affection, rescuing, showing ingenuity, and showing leadership (see Figure 1). Investigating the behavioral patterns of a character helps understand how well (or poorly) the character has been constructed, i.e. the complexity and multidimensionality of the character.

Ingenuity	Incompetence
Physical aggression	Victim of physical aggression
Verbal aggression	Victim of verbal aggression
Leadership	Follower
Rescuing (bravery)	Helpless
Achievement	Failure
Asking for advice/protection	Guidance given
Object of reward	
Shows affection	
Praises	

Figure 1. Behavioral patterns adopted from Thompson and Zerbinos (1995).

The second research question focuses on what the function of the female characters is in the film's storyline, i.e. the events that take place in the story. I will consider whether it is possible to draw some generalizations about the way women function in these types of films. The term 'function' is used here to refer to the role of the characters, in other words, what is a character's role in a particular film's storyline. I am interested in analyzing, for example, whether the characters are active or passive (i.e. do they initiate action themselves), are they shown in a position of power or do they demonstrate power, for example, over other characters, are they shown making independent decisions, and how fundamental their roles are in the narratives. As important as it is to

analyze what the characters actually *do*, I find it equally important to note what they *do not do*, in other words how they do not function in the narratives. This is similar to what McKee (2003: 110) describes as 'structural absence' in which certain kinds of representations are systematically excluded from texts. Kuhn (1982: 79) also regards the non-function of female characters, and the way in which they are *not* represented, a possible focus of feminist textual analysis. Investigating what a character does not do or how a character does not function can reveal a great deal about the underlying stereotypes and representations. This requires some comparison between the main female character and the character(s) she interacts with.

In conclusion, with the help of these research questions, I will be able to examine the representation of the main female characters in the five superhero action-adventure films in a multifaceted way. The purpose is to find out whether women are represented as multidimensional, active and contributive characters in the films' storylines, or whether they are portrayed as stereotypical eye-candy with little purpose in the films' events, or, quite possibly, as something in between.

3.2 Methods of analysis

In this chapter I discuss the methodology for the study at hand. The present study is an interpretative, qualitative study, aiming to analyze the representations of women in superhero action films. This study combines critical discourse analysis and textual analysis, and also makes use of the actantial model. Below I will explain these methods further.

Critical discourse analysis
Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009: 13) explain that the fundamental premise in discourse studies states that language use is not merely a linguistic action but also social, meaning that language and its use are not only grammatical but depend also on social norms and

rules. Discourse studies, therefore, analyzes language and its use in different situations and in different times (ibid.). Discourse must be understood in the broader sense here: as a communicative event that includes not only written text but also conversational interaction, with all its associated gestures, images and any other multimedia dimensions (van Dijk 2001: 98). This is a relevant observation as the current study does not merely look at what the characters say, but also takes into consideration their gestures, their visual appearance, behavior, and so on. As the name already suggests, critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) is "discourse analysis 'with an attitude'", and it focuses on social problems and the role of discourse in the production of said problems, often doing so from the perspective of the oppressed or dominated groups (van Dijk 2001: 96). Thus CDA is, by definition, biased (ibid.). CDA also often criticizes "the values that are transported by the dominant discourse and the ways in which the discourse shapes our perception of a given phenomenon" (Schreier 2012: 46). In addition to criticizing said values, CDA advocates change and corrections in the discourses (Blommaert 2005: 25). CDA is also interested in the ideologies – i.e. the belief systems that shape one's worldview and guide actions (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 59) – mediated by discourses, since ideology is seen "as an important aspect of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations" (Wodak 2001: 10).

Representation is a major area of study within CDA. Discourses possess the power to present ideas, events, and people in certain ways, in other words, create representations (Pietikäinen and Mäntynen 2009: 53). Representations have the power to shape attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, and the act of representation also holds a position of power: who has the power to present what or whom, and who decides what is being represented and how, which is why studying and dissecting representations is an integral part of CDA (ibid.: 56). For example, as has been established before in chapter 2.5, Stoltzfus argued that film representations of female characters are largely the product of the men who make the films. In other words, the men hold the power in the act of representation, deciding how women are represented. The current study focuses

on dissecting those representations of women through the analysis of visual representation, speech, behavior, and the roles of the characters in the films.

While CDA has been criticized for its biased nature (see e.g. Blommaert 2005: 31-35), it is precisely its ability to take a noticeably (and openly) critical – and in this case also a feminist – point of view to issues such as inequality and power, which makes it favorable for studying gender and representation. Since the current study presupposes some inequality and problems in the representation of the female characters based on previous studies and the history of female characters in films, critical discourse analysis functions as a critical approach to the analysis and the discussion that follows it.

Textual analysis

Textual analysis is used to get an idea of how people make sense of the world around them by making educated interpretations of texts such as films, television shows, magazines, and so on (McKee 2003: 1). Textual analysis can therefore reveal information on how particular groups are represented (ibid.: 31) – which is exactly what this study aims to do. McKee (2003: 4) defines text in textual analysis as something "that we make meaning from", and therefore it can be a book, a film, or even a piece of clothing or furniture. Similarly to CDA and discourse then, text is understood in a broader sense rather than merely a piece of writing. As McKee (2003: 37) states: "[h]ow we make sense of other people is important to how we then treat them", which resonates with the current study in the sense that how women are represented in superhero action films sends out a message to the audience on how women should be treated and viewed in these type of films.

Textual analysis is also seen as a crucial part of feminist film theory, as it can help deconstruct patriarchal ideology[13] by exposing the meaning-making processes in films, or in a sense, by making the "invisible visible" (Kuhn 1982: 78-79). Thus, Kuhn (ibid.:

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[13] Kuhn (1982: 256) defines patriarchal ideology as "an operation through which woman is constructed as eternal, mythical and unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed meanings".

82) defines textual analysis as "a form of reading which starts out with the aim of uncovering processes and structures at work in a text", therefore opening the seemingly natural ideologies present in the text to critical examination. A feminist textual analysis does this by, for example, "pointing to the ways in which [the film] constructs women through its images or its narrative structure" or by uncovering absences, i.e. how women are *not* represented (Kuhn ibid.: 71).

A textual analysis method that helps reveal potentially problematic representations is the commutation test in which one element of a text is replaced with another, slightly different element (McKee 2003: 107). In the current study the commutation test is done by replacing women with men, which can help identify key elements in the representation of women. This process is similar to the textual intervention strategy in literary studies, in which a text is somehow intervened and transformed (e.g. by substituting words, 'she' instead of 'he', or even completely shifting the genre of the text), producing changes in the original text that one must then consider and analyze the effects of (Pope 1995: 1-3). To summarize, through textual analysis the present study aims to make visible the way the female characters are represented through visual means, speech and behavior.

Actantial model

To answer the second research question, I will use Greimas's actantial model as a basis for analyzing the function and role of the characters. Greimas constructed a model based on the idea that actors in narrative stories have an intention and they aspire toward an aim, which is "the achievement of something pleasant, agreeable, or favourable, or the evasion of something unpleasant, disagreeable, or unfavourable" (Bal and van Boheemen 2009: 202). In Greimas's model these actors are called actants, i.e. a fundamental role or function, which share some characteristic quality, and which can also extend to things or abstract quantities in addition to characters (Bal and van Boheemen 2009: 202; Lothe 2000: 77). Greimas introduced six actants: subject, object, sender (sometimes also called 'power'), receiver, helper, and opponent (Bal and van

Boheemen 2009: 203-206). I will aim to identify which of these actants apply to each character, and this will also help me analyze the characters' activity/passivity.

Although originating from literary studies, Greimas's actantial model has been applied successfully in television and films as well, and it is perhaps best exemplified in traditional fairy tales, and many studies have referred to the model, for example, Natasha Pharmasetiawan's (n.d.) Once Upon a Twisted Time: Reconstructing the Image of the Ideal Women in Fairytales and Onodera Susumu's (2010) Greimas's Actantial Model and the Cinderella Story: The Simplest Way for the Structural Analysis of Narratives. The application of the actantial model to a generic fairy tale is illustrated in Figure 2. In traditional fairy tales the subject is usually the prince whose aim is to save the princess (the object). The sender, or power, that instigates the action made by the subject could be, for example, the king or often it might be an abstraction such as fate or society, while the receiver is the character who benefits from the action (for example, the princess who is freed from her captor and/or the prince who gets the princess, or even the king himself who gains more power by the joining of the two kingdoms). A helper is someone or something that helps accomplish the action, for example, a fairy godmother, a magic sword, or the prince's loyal friend in battle. Lastly, the opponent is of course someone or something that hinders the action, in traditional fairy tales usually an evil queen or a dragon that the prince must defeat. It is also possible to distinguish between active and passive actants, for example, a character might be considered a passive opponent when s/he does nothing to save another character from drowning. (Bal and van Boheemen 2009: 204; Hébert 2006).
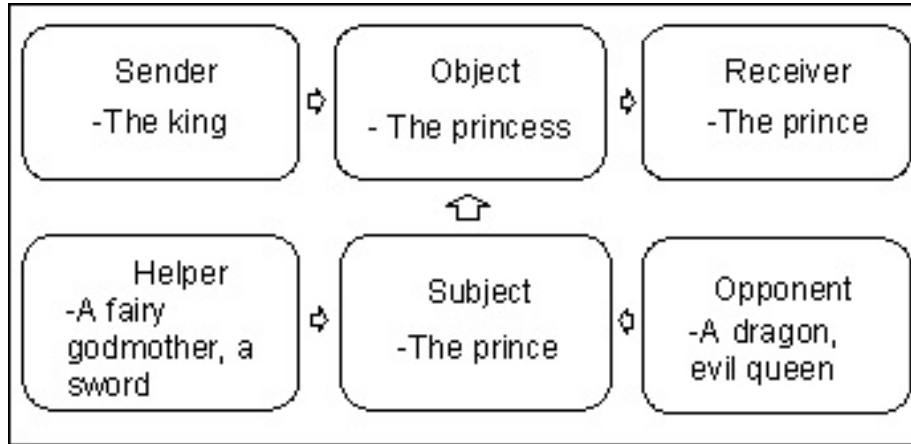
Figure 2. Actantial model applied to a generic fairy tale. Figure adopted from Hébert 2006.

In addition to Greimas's actantial model, I will employ the concept of *flat* and *round* characters, which relates to the issue of character development (Lothe, 2000: 80). In short, flat characters are one-dimensional, and experience very little or no character development at all and their behavior is predictable. Round characters, on the other hand, are more multidimensional and complex; they develop throughout the narrative and surprise the viewer/reader. Investigating whether the characters in this study go through any character development will be of particular interest considering the multidimensionality of the characters.

In chapter 2.2 I discussed Mulvey's male gaze theory and its fundamental influence on feminist film theory. Although I disagreed with certain aspects of the male gaze theory (see chapter 2.2), I find it an issue to be considered, or kept in mind, when analyzing films and their portrayals of women from the feminist point of view. The way the camera actually shoots the women, i.e. the camera angles chosen when filming the female characters, plays a significant role in portraying the characters. If the camera often focuses on, for example, the female character's chest area or long lingering shots of her curves, it depicts the character as an object, drawing attention away from her personality and role in the narrative. In this study then, the male gaze theory is applied with the hypothesis that the way in which the camera shoots the female character is

designed to appeal to the male audience[14] specifically, positioning the women as [sex] objects.

To summarize, critical discourse analysis and textual analysis were chosen as methods for the current study due to their nature as critical approaches: CDA by definition takes a critical stance towards its subject of study, and textual analysis in the field of feminist film theory aims to make visible the invisible, thus subjecting the film text to critical examination. Both CDA and textual analysis are therefore suitable for studying representation from a feminist point of view. Whereas CDA functions as an approach to the analysis and the discussion of representation, textual analysis provides the tools to conduct the analysis. The actantial model together with the theory of flat and round characters adds to textual analysis by providing more depth into analyzing the functions of the characters.

Due to the interpretative nature of the present study, no all-encompassing guidelines or specific frameworks are utilized in the analysis of the female representations as the representations may vary a great deal within the data selection. Instead, the data is examined as systematically as possible in terms of key themes – these being visual appearance, speech, behavior, and function – while allowing for interesting themes and topics to emerge from the data itself. The key to conducting this sort of analysis is, in my opinion, to watch the films multiple times at different stages of doing the analysis, as it enables the emergence of new insights which might not have surfaced at the first viewing. The analytical steps, therefore, consisted of watching each film and writing notes on the female characters. After making preliminary notes, I watched the films again focusing on more specific scenes and honing in on the details of each character. For the organization of the analysis I chose specific scenes which best exemplified each theme and point I wanted to make.

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[14] As was mentioned in 2.2, the male gaze theory does not traditionally take into consideration the homosexual (female) audience, and given the heterosexual male emphasis of the films and their narratives, the male audience is the assumed audience of these camera angles.

3.3 Data selection and collection

My research focuses specifically on the film representations of the female characters also known from comic books, and therefore my data consists of the following films: *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). As there are many more films I could have chosen as my data, I needed to narrow down my data selection drastically. The first criterion was, naturally, that the film is based on a comic book or comic books, and that it features at least some female characters in the main cast. The second criterion was that the main genre of the film is action-adventure. As it is generally as well as quite stereotypically a very male-dominated genre, studying female characters in this genre is particularly interesting and topical, considering the success of this genre's films. With these criteria I still would have had a numerous list of films to choose from, and therefore I decided to narrow down the selection to films made after 2010, which would place the films in the same context in terms of the time in which they were made. One important criterion was also the success of the films: I wanted to look at films that were box office blockbusters, which would indicate that they reached a wide audience and were more likely to have received wider visibility in the media as well.

Taking into consideration all the criteria mentioned, the five films listed above were selected based on their ranking in the all time worldwide box office blockbuster listing (Box Office Mojo All Time Worldwide Box Office 2014). At the time of the data selection, *Marvel's The Avengers* ranked third on the list with 1,519.6 million dollars, *Iron Man 3* sixth with 1,215.4 million dollars in worldwide gross, *The Dark Knight Rises* 11th with 1,084.9 million dollars, *Guardians of the Galaxy* 51st with 773.3 million dollars, and *The Amazing Spider-Man* 54th with 757.9 million dollars. However, *Marvel's The Avengers* was omitted from the study due to the fact that the film had already been used as research data (see e.g. Stoltzfus 2014) and, as such, an analysis of it would most likely not have brought up anything significantly new. Instead I decided to replace *The*

Avengers with the second installation into the Captain America franchise: *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), which also features the character of Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff in a more significant role than in *The Avengers*. The film was also a box office success, with a worldwide gross of 714.4 million dollars.

All of these films were already familiar to me, as I had seen all of them at least once, which gave me an advantage since I was able to effortlessly make a list of the female characters that play bigger roles in the films, and therefore conclude that the data selection would be sufficient for my study. Altogether in the films there are 12 major female characters that are given proper names in the stories, they appear in more than one scene, and they interact and have dialogue with other characters. However, 12 characters is quite an excessive amount to analyze in the scope of the present study, and therefore my main focus will be on the main female characters of the films: Selina Kyle/Catwoman (*The Dark Knight Rises*), Gwen Stacy (*The Amazing Spider-Man*), Pepper Potts (*Iron Man 3*), Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*), and Gamora (*Guardians of the Galaxy*). That being said, some of the other female characters will be mentioned in the analysis in relation to the above mentioned but the main focus of analysis will be on these five characters.

3.4 The films and their female characters

Next I will give a brief summary of each of the films in this study to familiarize the reader with the data. I will also give brief introductions of the female characters I intend to analyze. I have included images of the official posters for each film at the end of this thesis, in the appendices, to give the reader a visual reference to each of the films. Interestingly, all the posters include the main female character except *The Dark Knight Rises*, which only shows the protagonist and hero of the film, Batman. Obviously the studios put out more than one version of the posters, so I tried to select the ones that were more widely used; for example, another quite widely used poster for *The Dark*

Knight Rises was one that did not portray any of the characters, only the Batman -logo set against the skyline of a city.

3.4.1 The Dark Knight Rises

The Dark Knight Rises (2012) is the only film in this study featuring characters created by DC Comics. Batman is the alter ego of millionaire heir Bruce Wayne, who witnessed his parents' murder when he was young. Trained by the League of Shadows, a group of vigilantes and assassins, Bruce becomes Batman in order to fight crime in his home city of Gotham. To avoid suspicions and to conceal his identity as Batman, Bruce adopts the role of a carefree millionaire playboy. The events of *The Dark Knight Rises* take place roughly eight years after the previous film, *The Dark Knight* (2008), in which Bruce Wayne as Batman (actor Christian Bale) took the blame for the murder of district attorney Harvey Dent in order to create peace in Gotham. In the beginning of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce has retired from being Batman and has become a recluse, but as a new enemy rises to threaten Gotham's peace, Bruce is forced to come out of retirement and defend the city as Batman again. In order to defeat the villain Bane, Batman teams up with mysterious thief Selina Kyle, also known as the Catwoman (actress Anne Hathaway).

Catwoman made her first appearance in the Batman comic books in 1940 and ever since the character has appeared numerous times in comic books, video games and cinema (DC Comics n.d.). Catwoman and Batman have a complicated relationship since Catwoman is a thief with a strict moral compass, placing her somewhere between good and evil. Therefore she is both an enemy and an ally to Batman. She is athletic and skilled at combat and using weapons. In *The Dark Knight Rises* Catwoman's path first crosses with Bruce/Batman when she is hired to steal his fingerprints. Initially, she is reluctant to assist Batman in defeating Bane, but eventually changes her mind and teams up with him.

3.4.2 The Amazing Spider-Man

*The Amazing Spider-*Man (2012) is the latest (at the time of writing) cinematic reboot of the story of Peter Parker, telling the origin story of Spider-Man – a superhero with spider-like qualities such as the ability to climb walls with his bare hands and shoot spider web from his wrists. Peter Parker (actor Andrew Garfield) is a nerdy teenager who lives with his uncle and aunt. Investigating into his parents' disappearance Peter is led to his father's former partner, Dr. Connors at the Oscorp pharmaceutical company, where Peter's crush Gwen Stacy (actress Emma Stone) also works as an intern. Peter sneaks into a laboratory where the company keeps genetically modified spiders and gets bitten by one of the spiders. Soon after Peter discovers that, due to the spider bite, he suddenly has increased strength and agility, and that he can indeed produce spider web strong enough to carry his own weight. In the course of the film, Peter learns what it means to have superhuman powers when he must fight Dr. Connors – who turns into a lizard man after injecting himself with an experimental drug in the hopes of regenerating his amputated arm – while at the same time trying to keep Gwen safe and his true identity hidden.

Gwen Stacy first appeared in the Spider-Man comics in 1965 and was introduced as Spider-Man's first true love (Marvel Universe Wiki n.d.a). She comes from a good family and has had a secure and supporting upbringing. Her father is a police captain and very protective of his daughter. Gwen has a talent for science and interns at the Oscorp pharmaceutical company. In *The Amazing Spider-Man* Peter and Gwen get to know each other and start dating while Peter is also going through his transformation into Spider-Man.

3.4.3 Iron Man 3

The third installation into the highly successful *Iron Man* franchise (each of the three films have grossed over 100 million dollars on their opening weekend in the United

States alone (see for instance IMDb.com)) continues to follow billionaire inventor and weapon industrialist Tony Stark (actor Robert Downey Jr.), whose alter ego is known as the Iron Man. Stark becomes the Iron Man when he puts on his weaponized suit of armor that he invented and built himself. Unlike most superheroes who attempt to conceal their true identities, Stark's identity as the Iron Man is public knowledge. *Iron Man 3* (2013) takes place after the events of *Marvel's The Avengers*. In the third film, Tony faces a powerful enemy by the name of Mandarin, who eventually turns out to be a former acquaintance Aldrich Killian. Killian is trying to create super-soldiers but needs Tony's help in stabilizing the formula. To gain leverage over Tony, Killian kidnaps Tony's girlfriend Pepper Potts (actress Gwyneth Paltrow). In the film's final action sequence Tony sets out to rescue Pepper, and destroy Killian and his super-soldiers.

Pepper Potts first appeared in the comic books in 1963 (Marvel Universe Wiki n.d.b). She was one of the secretaries at Stark Industries and was trusted a great deal of Tony's responsibilities in running the company (ibid.). In the original comic books, Pepper and Tony never pursued a romantic relationship, but in the films they are dating. In the films, Pepper starts as Tony's personal assistant/secretary and she has a clear infatuation for her boss. After becoming the Iron Man, Tony becomes less interested in running Stark Industries, and after giving essentially no thought to it, makes Pepper the CEO in the second film. By this time they are already pursuing their romantic relationship as well. In the third film Pepper appears to be running the company still and is living in Tony's mansion.

3.4.4 Captain America: The Winter Soldier

Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) is the first sequel to *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and continues the story of Steve Rogers (actor Chris Evans), also known as Captain America. Steve Rogers is transformed into the world's first super-soldier with enhanced strength, speed, and stamina in the first film. He wears a costume with

stars and stripes – hence the name Captain America – and his main weapon is a shield. In the end of the first film, Captain America is forced to crash his plane into ice, where he is found and rescued 70 years later. The second film also takes place after the events of *Marvel's The Avengers*, and shows Steve getting more accustomed to life in the modern world. He works for S.H.I.E.L.D.[15] and is teamed up with Natasha Romanoff (actress Scarlett Johansson), a.k.a. the Black Widow – a former Russian spy. After an assassin only known as the Winter Soldier kills Nick Fury, the director of S.H.I.E.L.D., Steve and Natasha learn that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by an enemy organization called the HYDRA. Together they embark on a mission to stop HYDRA and its followers.

Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow was first introduced in the comic books in 1964 as a Soviet spy and an occasional enemy to the Avengers (Marvel Universe Wiki n.d.c). Later in the comic books she, however, joined the Avengers and started working for S.H.I.E.L.D. Black Widow's character also appears in *The Avengers* and *Iron Man* 2. In *Iron Man 2* she is hired as Pepper Potts's replacement to be Tony Stark's personal assistant – in reality she is working undercover to assess Stark. In *The Avengers* she works as part of the team in trying to stop an alien attack on Earth. She has a larger role in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* as she works closely with the main hero, Steve Rogers.

3.4.5 Guardians of the Galaxy

Guardians of the Galaxy (2014) introduces a group of characters with special abilities and even non-human qualities. Apart from the first scene of the film, the events take place in outer space in different galaxies and planets, instead of planet Earth. In the center of the action is Peter Quill (actor Chris Pratt), also known as Star-Lord, a human who was abducted by a spaceship when he was young. Since then Peter has made a name for

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[15] Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division is a spy agency in Marvel's comic books and films. The agency often deals with supernatural and superhuman phenomena.

himself as a thief of mysterious objects, and after stealing a mystical Orb he becomes the target of more than one party interested in obtaining the Orb. Among them are Rocket Raccoon, a genetically enhanced talking raccoon, and his partner Groot, a walking and talking tree; and Gamora (actress Zoe Saldana), an assassin sent by Ronan, the villain of the film, to obtain the Orb for him. Despite starting out as enemies, the characters are forced to team up through the course of different events, and in the end they find themselves unlikely heroes as they fight to save the galaxy from the Orb's catastrophic power.

Gamora made her first appearance in the comic books in 1975 as the adopted daughter of Thanos, who trained and modified Gamora into an assassin (Marvel Universe Wiki n.d.d). Gamora is not a human being and her most distinctive feature is her green skin. In *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Gamora betrays her adoptive father and Ronan, and teams up with Peter, Rocket, Groot and Drax to stop Ronan and Thanos from destroying a planet.

The following chapter features the main analysis of the present study. It contains subsections for each of the female characters' analyses in a chronological order.

4 ANALYSIS

In this section I will present my analysis of the five female characters individually in their own subsections using the methods discussed in section 3.2. The analysis is organized according to the year of the films' release dates from oldest to the most recent, thus beginning with the analysis of Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and ending with the character of Gamora in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). What this order provides is a chronological overview into the possible development of the representations. Images from the films as well as excerpts from the dialogue will be used when applicable to better demonstrate the examples used in the analysis. The analysis of each character follows roughly the same outline, beginning with the character's *visual appearance*, then accounting for their *speech* and *behavior*, and finally examining their *function* through the actantial model.

4.1 Catwoman/Selina Kyle

Catwoman, a.k.a. Selina Kyle, is the main female character in *The Dark Knight Rises* film. The character is portrayed by Anne Hathaway, a white American actress. The age of the character is not stated, but since the actress portraying her is in her early 30s, it is safe to assume that the character is also around the same age. In the original comic books, Selina Kyle grew up an orphan and became a thief to survive and to take care of her friends (DC Comics n.d.). Although *The Dark Knight Rises* does not give an explicit account of Selina's past and the birth of her alter ego as Catwoman, it suggests a similar underprivileged background to the original comic books: she appears to sympathize with other underprivileged individuals, often standing up for them as seen, for example, in a scene where she defends a young boy who stole an apple from a group of grown men. She is also shown living in a crammed apartment, in a less than wealthy neighborhood. In addition, she explains to Bruce Wayne that she only targets the

wealthy: "I take what I need from those who have more than enough. I don't stand on the shoulders of people with less".

As regards her *visual appearance*, Catwoman is portrayed having a long reddish brown hair and a slim figure; she cannot be described as being very muscular, although she is still capable of fighting more muscular men. Therefore she represents, and indeed reinforces, an already existing ideal of a certain kind of body image for women, which, according to Grogan (2007: 9), consists of the idealization of slender body types. Her outfit further accentuates her slim figure: the Catwoman outfit is tight and close-fitting, leaving little room for any extra body fat (see Image 1).

Image 1. Selina Kyle in her Catwoman outfit. Still photo by Ron Phillips 2012.

As part of her "Cat" outfit she wears high stiletto heels – a symbol of femininity, much like red lipstick, but also signifying the dominatrix (Steele 2001: 75) – which would seem impractical for fighting, yet she still manages to jump down from buildings, and even use them as a kind of a weapon. In a scene where Catwoman is held at gunpoint, the man with the gun comments on her choice of shoes, asking whether they make it difficult to walk. Catwoman replies: "I don't know. Do they?" before using the sharp heel of her shoe to kick him in the leg and disarming him, thus regaining control of the situation. Her outfit also includes a mask to conceal her identity, night goggles that fold

over her head to look like cat ears, and a utility belt (as seen in Image 1). She spends most of her screen time – i.e. the amount of time that the character appears on the screen – in this tight black leathery outfit, which resembles that of the dominatrix from the mask concealing her face down to her thigh high stiletto boots. The only thing that she is missing is a whip, which, in fact, is a part of Catwoman's arsenal in many other portrayals, such as the 1992 *Batman Returns* film.

When she is not wearing her Catwoman outfit she is mostly seen in close-fitting black dresses, which either expose her legs or her décolletage, or both. Her appearance evokes a few comments from the male characters: in the scene described earlier the man who has Catwoman at gunpoint says "the outfit's nice" while sizing her up, and earlier in the film, the same man, as Selina is meeting him in a dodgy bar, comments on her black cocktail dress by saying: "And even in that dress, no one's gonna miss you". His tone is disdainful and his utterance indicates that even though he can have pleasure in looking at her, he does not value her existence and she is expendable to him and, indeed, everyone else. It is also implied indirectly that men find Selina extremely attractive: even the senator that she kidnaps is described to have fallen in love with her, and a wealthy married man at a charity ball is seemingly captivated by her and runs after her when she abruptly makes her exit after dancing with Bruce Wayne – the older man even scolds Bruce for scaring her away. Although these utterances and events are not the main focus in the film, they nevertheless contribute to the representation of Selina/Catwoman as a femme fatale who sways powerful and wealthy men anywhere she goes. As Stoltzfus (2014: 84) describes: "Kyle uses her sexuality as a weapon to lull men into a false sense of power and security while robbing them; -- implying that women's bodies are dangerous and ought not be trusted".

Image 2. "Male gaze" in action.

The filmmakers also do not shy away from presenting Catwoman's body in all its glory on screen. Perhaps the most blatant display of a specific part of her body happens when she is riding Batman's motorcycle, ready to blow open a tunnel. In order to fire the guns on the motorcycle she needs to lean over the front of the bike, and as the camera follows the movement of her body, she leans forward and provides a perfect view of her backside – covered by her tight leather outfit (Image 2). There are a few other scenes as well where the camera first focuses on a close-up of Catwoman's behind and torso before showing her face. This seems to cater to the "male gaze" idea: the theory would argue that the audience is expected to assume the role of a heterosexual male and thus find pleasure in looking at the female body. As was, however, mentioned in relation to this theory in 2.2, the male gaze theory does not account for the homosexual female or male and how she/he would relate to this imagery. Furthermore, the male gaze can be said presenting Catwoman as an object rather than a person, since it focuses on her physical attributes over her identity.

Catwoman's cunning and adaptable personality becomes evident early on in the film through her *speech* and *behavior*. The first time the audience is introduced to Catwoman's character she is impersonating a maid at Bruce Wayne's mansion. This is her scheme to get into the mansion in order to break into a safe. When Bruce Wayne

sneaks up on her, as she is investigating an archery target in Bruce's office, and shoots an arrow by her head into the target, she screams startled and turns around to face Bruce. She immediately falls into her role as a humble maid, apologizing profoundly for snooping around. She speaks very quietly, almost whispering, her voice is delicate and respectful, and she also stutters a little bit. She avoids eye contact with Bruce, gazing downwards mostly. Her entire demeanor, from the way she speaks to her shrunken and slouched posture, embodies weakness and insecurity (see Image 3).

Image 3. Catwoman/Selina impersonating as a maid.

However, when Bruce comments that the pearl necklace that she is wearing resembles unmistakably his late mother's pearls which were in the safe, thus calling out her breaking into an "uncrackable" safe, she quickly adapts to the turn of events and abandons her innocent and insecure maid act. She replies almost flirtatiously: "Oops, nobody told me it was uncrackable". Her entire presence changes in an instant: her voice becomes lower, she no longer stutters or laughs nervously, and her body language becomes more relaxed and more confident (Images 4 and 5). When she walks towards Bruce her movement is "cat-like": graceful, agile, and very feminine. She is exuding confidence.

Image 4. Selina adapts quickly to getting caught lying.

Image 5. Selina's body language changes when she abandons her role as insecure maid.

Further regarding her speech, Catwoman's manner of speaking in most scenes can be described as impertinent, and often her comments reflect her dry sense of humor. For example, when she shows up at a bar meeting with the people who hired her to steal Bruce Wayne's fingerprints, accompanied by an unknown man, she explains his presence to her employers by saying "I like having someone around to open doors for me". This might be her way of turning the focus away from the man and his real purpose, which is to act as her insurance policy if things at the meeting would not go according to her liking. Her utterance can also be interpreted as belittling her companion in the sense that it implies that men are only needed for opening doors for women. This can be seen playing into the age-old (patriarchal) etiquette that a gentleman should open doors for a lady. The reverse situation of this – where a man makes a comment that renders the woman to nothing more than a single attribute or function – is one that has been seen in films and television countless times.

Other instances where Catwoman exhibits impertinence in her speech are, for example, when she and Batman are fighting a large group of thugs and Batman forbids her to use her gun against them (he quite forcefully knocks the gun out of her hand) because he is against killing, and she replies: "Where's the fun in that?". In the midst of a threatening situation, her comment gets a sarcastic tone – surely there is nothing fun about the situation they are in. Thus, it seems Catwoman's insolent sarcasm is a way for her to mask her true feelings of worry and terror in difficult situations and to appear 'tough'. Similarly, following the fight scene as Batman and Catwoman are forced to flee from the outnumbered fight, and Catwoman has no other choice than to follow Batman, jumping down from the rooftop and getting into his vehicle, she says: "My mother warned me about getting into cars with strange men". She again seems to mask her distrust towards Batman – since at this point she does not really know him at all – in a comment that can be dismissed as humorous and casual. In addition, when she is called a "dumb bitch" by Daggett, one of the people who hired her to steal Wayne's fingerprints, she replies calmly with a hint of mock shock: "Nobody ever accused me of being dumb!".

In terms of the Bechdel test, the film does not fare very well. Although Catwoman exchanges a few lines of speech with her female friend, these exchanges hardly make what one would call a conversation. Moreover, the Bechdel test requires that the female characters are named, and Catwoman's friend is never given a name in the film's diegesis, i.e. the film's world. Catwoman and the other more prominent female character of the film, Miranda Tate, also do not interact with each other despite being in the same scene at least once.

Catwoman exhibits a variety of *behavioral patterns* (see Figure 1) through the course of the film. One of the behavioral patterns in Thompson and Zerbinos's (1995) model is ingenuity, and Catwoman demonstrates this, for example, when she is able to break into a safe that is supposedly "uncrackable", and also when she exhibits foresight by preparing intricate backup plans to ensure she will prevail in negotiations. She is also

able to think fast on her feet and adapt to situations changing quickly. She shows a great deal of physical aggression in the film, for example, when she attacks Daggett in his home she punches, kicks, and pushes him forcefully against the wall by his throat (Image 6). She takes part in multiple fights throughout the film as well. Even though she shows a great deal of physical aggression, she also demonstrates quite a lot of emotion and affection as well. For example, she cares about Bruce and pleads Bruce/Batman to leave Gotham with her when it looks like a nuclear bomb will destroy the city.

Image 6. Catwoman attacking Daggett in his home.

Catwoman is rescued in the film at least twice, in quite different ways. The perhaps more traditional rescuing happens when Batman intervenes in a fight where Catwoman is clearly outnumbered. Together they fight off the thugs at first, but they are forced to flee the scene eventually. Once they are safe, Catwoman attempts to leave and the following conversation ensues:

> Catwoman: See you around.
> Batman: You're welcome.
> C: I had it under control.
> B: Those weren't street thugs, they were trained killers. I saved your life. In return I
> need to know what you did with Bruce Wayne's fingerprints.
> C: Wayne wasn't kidding about a "powerful" friend.

Batman is expecting a thank you from Catwoman for saving her, and when she replies essentially saying that she did not ask nor need his help, he validates his actions by

implying she would not have been able to handle the situation by herself against these "trained killers". Thus, he also presumes to know Catwoman's training history and belittles her abilities. The film indeed explicitly establishes that without him, she would most likely have been killed, thus making sure that Batman is seen as the hero. This act of heroism from Batman also seems to give him a sense of entitlement as Batman thinks Catwoman now owes him something (i.e. information) in return.

Another kind of rescuing that happens in the film stems from a deep-rooted patriarchal ideology familiar also from many fairy tales, in which a knight in shining armor saves the princess. In *The Dark Knight Rises* Catwoman's motive and goal is to wipe away her criminal past from all known records with a program called "Clean Slate", so that she can start a new life on the right side of the law. The men who promise to give her the Clean Slate in exchange for Wayne's fingerprints do not hold their end of the deal and tell her that the program does not exist. The one who can, however, give her what she wants is Bruce Wayne. All she basically needs to do is choose him and help him save Gotham, and he can wipe away her past criminal record, giving her a fresh start. Therefore, Batman saves Catwoman from her life of crime and running from the law, and at the end of the film Catwoman and Batman – or Selina and Bruce as they have now left their masked identities behind – are seen starting a new, happy life together (Image 7). The film therefore relies on the stereotype that women need rescuing, and that a happy ending consists of a heterosexual relationship.

Image 7. Selina and Bruce starting a new life together.

Although Catwoman is rescued by Batman in the film, she is also seen doing the rescuing a couple of times. For example, she drives away a man harassing her female friend (while also stealing his expensive watch). She also rescues a young boy from a group of thugs chasing after him, single-handedly fighting off the men. Moreover, she saves Batman from Bane, albeit with a motorcycle that Batman gave her. Batman, who is opposed to using any deadly force against his opponents, is losing a battle against Bane, and Bane is about to give the final blow when Catwoman arrives on the motorcycle and shoots Bane with one of the big guns built into the vehicle (Image 8). "About the whole no guns thing...I'm not sure I feel as strongly about it as you do", she comments to bewildered Batman, maintaining her "bad girl edge" even when acting heroically.

Image 8. Catwoman arrives to save Batman.

In the comic books, Catwoman is portrayed as walking a fine line between good and evil, hero and villain (DC Comics n.d.), and *The Dark Knight Rises* stays true to the original source text in this respect as has been established above to some extent already. Catwoman's main concern and motivation for action in the film is her own well-being, and the character's premise is that she is prepared to do whatever is necessary for her own survival, which often means she operates in a grey area of doing questionable things for, what she would argue, the right reasons. There are multiple examples that demonstrate her controversial behavior, such as the first scene she is featured in. After being caught in a lie and stealing from Bruce Wayne, she taunts Bruce by saying, "[l]ook, you wouldn't beat up a woman any more than I would beat up a cripple", before she kicks Bruce's cane from under him and he falls. "Of course, sometimes

exceptions have to be made", she explains before making an agile escape through the window. Therefore, from the first time the audience meets the character, she is portrayed almost as a villain to the hero, Bruce Wayne.

In terms of Greimas's actantial model, Catwoman actually alternates mainly between two actants: opponent and helper – further evidence of her unclear stance in the hero-villain spectrum. As seen above, she starts out as an opponent to Bruce Wayne. Later when Batman asks for her help in finding Bane, she appears to become the helper as she agrees to lead Batman to Bane's hideout. She, however, double-crosses Batman when she leads Batman into a trap and watches as Bane beats him up — an action that can be described as "passive opponent". Passive opponent does not actively do any harm (i.e. Catwoman does not beat up Batman herself), but does not do anything to help either (Hébert 2006). She explains that she did not have any other choice; otherwise Bane would have killed her instead. Towards the end of the film she becomes the helper again as she joins in saving the city of Gotham and saves Batman from Bane, thus redeeming herself from not helping Batman fight Bane earlier.

Catwoman's conversion from a self-preserving and independent character to someone hearing the call of duty in the time of crisis does not come without a push from an outside force. She is judged by Bruce Wayne/Batman in multiple occasions throughout the film. When she is dancing with Wayne they have a conversation in which Wayne comments on her wrongful pronunciation of Ibiza ("It's pronounced Ibeetha. You wouldn't want any of these folks realizing you're a crook, not a social climber.") and questions her moral choices ("Is that how you justify stealing?"). When Batman gives her a weaponized motorcycle to blow an escape tunnel open she agrees to do this, but tells him that after she has blown the tunnel, she will make her escape from the city. Batman replies "[t]here's more to you than that", which on the one hand sounds encouraging and supportive, but on the other hand seems to apply more pressure on Catwoman to do what he thinks is right and again questions her morality. She seems to interpret his utterance as meaning the latter, since her reply is an apologetic "[s]orry I

keep letting you down". Stoltzfus (2014: 84) also notes that Catwoman's interaction and eventual romantic relationship with Bruce/Batman is ultimately what transforms her into a "moral human being".

Catwoman's role, or *function*, in the film is to provide Batman with a new ally, and a new love interest. Although she initially has her own agenda in the film, seemingly separate from that of the main storyline, it is realized in connection to Bruce Wayne/Batman: the only way for her to achieve her goal in the end is to work with Batman. Therefore, as has been mentioned earlier, her future with a fresh start is quite literally in the hands of a man. Instead of giving her a proper background story, and following through with her individual storyline, her objective is tied together with the main male character in a way that follows a traditional pattern. Even though Catwoman has all the prerequisites to take care of herself, and she has done so in the past (although one could argue that the underlying message is that it is because she has not had a man guiding her that she is in the trouble that she is), she still needs a man to save her.

Although Catwoman's representation in terms of her visual appearance and her storyline represent a rather stereotypical and patriarchal image of femininity and female characters, she is a more complex character underneath the surface. As has been established, she is neither a hero nor a villain, but definitely something in between, which makes her more complicated than the common hero/villain who is often defined by a single overpowering characteristic. She is smart and in many ways capable of taking care of herself. She is also not the typical damsel in distress type either since she does take action instead of passively waiting for things to happen to her. She does undergo some character development, which makes her more of a round character as opposed to a flat one, even though the development follows a largely patriarchal ideology.

4.2 Gwen Stacy

Emma Stone, a white American actress in her mid-20s, portrays Gwen Stacy, the female lead character, in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. In the film Gwen Stacy is a high school senior, therefore placing her age at around 17. Gwen is a regular teenager – i.e. she does not possess any superhuman abilities and she is not involved in any unlawful activities – from a quite privileged background: her father is the police captain and her family lives in what appears to be a rather luxurious apartment in New York City. She is a talented science student, and a good student overall, tutoring other students and helping those in need. For example, when Peter is being beat up in the school yard by another student that Gwen tutors, she intervenes and tells Gordon (the bully) that she has been disappointed in his study efforts lately, thus diverting his attention away from Peter.

Concerning her *visual appearance*, she has blonde hair and a figure that conforms to the same slender body ideal as Catwoman (see 4.1). Gwen is first introduced in the film through Peter's eyes. He sees her outside their high school reading a book. She is sitting on a table, wearing knee high socks, short skirt exposing her thighs and a white jacket, and her hair is up in a perky ponytail. Peter, who is revealed as an amateur photographer earlier in the film, takes a photo of her from a distance, and the camera briefly shows Gwen through the lens (Image 9). Peter does not ask for her permission to take a picture of her, instead she is treated more like an object without a say in the matter.

Image 9. Gwen Stacy through the lens of Peter's camera.

Similar objectification of Gwen appears in a scene where Peter and his uncle are having a conversation in the school hallway while Gwen is idly standing in the background. Peter's uncle recognizes her from the photos that Peter has on his computer and in an attempt to embarrass Peter, he calls out to Gwen saying: "He's got you on his computer. I'm his probation officer". Then he leaves, leaving Peter to deal with the humiliating situation with Gwen. Although clearly meant as a joke, the scene further establishes Gwen as an object of Peter's desires. His uncle's joking comment about being Peter's probation officer further makes the situation awkward as it suggests criminal activity, making Gwen's pictures on Peter's computer questionable and suggesting a possible obsession with her. The uncomfortable situation is resolved when Peter explains that it was really his uncle and he mistook Gwen for someone else. In the end Peter manages to ask Gwen out in a very roundabout way and she agrees.

The film, in fact, already addresses the issue of Peter's possible obsession with Gwen in an earlier scene, where Peter infiltrates Gwen's place of work, posing as a new intern. The real reason he does this is to find out more about his absent father, who used to work at Oscorp and where Gwen also works as an intern. However, when Gwen sees Peter impersonating as "Rodrigo", she approaches him to inquire what he is doing. "Are you following me?" she asks, and although again the film intends this as a friendly joke, it brings up similar connotations as the scene with Peter's uncle. The significance of these scenes is that they seem to romanticize this type of relationship behavior: even though it is suggested twice (albeit jokingly) that Peter's crush on Gwen may have

taken unhealthy proportions, resulting in possible stalker behavior, Gwen is still flattered by his attention and agrees to go on a date with him. Earlier, films (and their respective books) such as *Twilight* and *50 Shades of Grey* have been criticized for promoting unhealthy, abusive romantic relationships to young adults by, for example, portraying it as romantic when the male character enters the female character's bedroom uninvited to watch her sleep at night (*Twilight*), or by romanticizing extreme jealousy (*50 Shades of Grey*) [16].

As regards her clothing, Gwen wears quite casual and sensible outfits throughout the film. She is most often seen in a short skirt and comfortable knitwear, and while her skirt exposes much of her legs, her clothing cannot be considered overly sexualized. She is also shown in her work clothing, which does not actually differ from her usual outfit except for the white laboratory coat. As regards her *speech*, Gwen does not have a great deal of dialogue in the film to begin with, and most of her dialogue is with Peter. Moreover, she does not have any dialogue with another female character (apart from few isolated words exchanged with her mother) in the entire film, thus resulting in the film failing the Bechdel test. In fact, she is not shown having any other friends apart from Peter, which for a teenage girl seems unlikely.

Many of her conversations with Peter are also defined by avoidance from Peter's part as he does not want to let her in on his secret life as the vigilante known as Spider-Man. When Gwen tries to question Peter, for example, about his bruises, he avoids answering her, telling her "it's nothing", or changing the subject. Even after Gwen finds out about Peter's identity as Spider-Man he is still reluctant to share everything with her. In fact, even when Peter eventually reveals to Gwen that he is Spider-Man, he avoids discussing it with her explicitly. Instead, he grabs Gwen with his spider web when she is trying to walk away, spinning her back into his arms (Image 10). Gwen is shocked

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[16] See e.g. Goodfriend, W. (2011). https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/psychologist-the-movies/201111/relationship-violence-in-twilight (accessed 4 March 2016) and Bersaglio, L. (2015). http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/03/50-shades-of-abuse-10-signs-of-unhealthy-relationships-a-la-christian-grey/ (accessed 4 March 2016).

and surprised as she comes to the realization that Peter is Spider-Man (Image 11), and instead of explaining anything to her, Peter kisses her. Gwen tries to say "[y]ou're Spider-Man", but Peter dismisses her by saying "[s]hut up", and continues to kiss her, thus avoiding any actual conversation with her about the matter.

Image 10. Peter revealing his identity as Spider-Man to Gwen by using his web.

Image 11. Gwen realizes that Peter is Spider-Man.

Regarding Gwen in terms of the *behavioral patterns* (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995) then, in many ways she is portrayed as being emotionally more available than Peter. She shows concern for Peter's health more than once, for example, when Peter gets beaten up she suggests he go see the nurse because he might have concussion. She also expresses concern for Peter's life, telling him that since her father is a policeman she has always lived in fear of him dying in the line of duty, and does not want to fear for Peter's life as well. Peter, however, dismisses her concern because he feels it is his duty to help people as Spider-Man. In addition, when Peter's uncle dies, Gwen tries to offer

him comfort and hugs him, but Peter merely pushes her away (Image 12), shutting her out of his life momentarily. She also gives advice and guidance to Peter in the film.

Image 12. Gwen tries to comfort grieving Peter.

Gwen also shows a great deal of ingenuity. It is suggested that she is the first in her class in science (with Peter coming in as second): in the scene where Peter infiltrates Oscorp as one of the interns, Gwen introduces him to her boss, Dr. Connors, as second in his science class to which Peter replies bemusedly "[s]econd? Are you sure?", trying to assert himself as better than Gwen. Gwen, however, replies confidently smirking "[y]eah, pretty sure". Later in the film Peter needs Gwen's help in defeating Dr. Connors who has become a lizard man, and asks whether Gwen can manufacture an antidote. Gwen replies slightly annoyed that of course she can, because she does that every day at work as the head intern. She also shows a great deal of bravery. When she is at the laboratory making the antidote, Peter calls to tell her that Connors is on his way to her. He orders her to leave the building ("People are gonna die. You leave right now. That is an order, okay?"), attempting to establish himself as superior by telling her what to do. Gwen, however, ignores him and sets out to get everybody out of the building. She sets off the fire alarm and hides in a closet when lizard-Connors arrives. Connors finds her, but she is able to fight him off by using an aerosol can and a lighter, creating a self-made flame-thrower (Image 13). She also saves Spider-Man when lizard-Connors attacks their high school: she hits Connors in the back with a trophy, thus drawing his attention away from struggling Spider-Man.

Image 13. Gwen fighting off Connors with a do-it-yourself flame thrower.

When compared to her predecessor Mary Jane Watson in the 2002-2007 *Spider-Man* trilogy (Columbia Pictures), Gwen is not used as blatantly as a plot device and a damsel-in-distress trope as Mary Jane is (see also Bogarosh 2013). Whereas Mary Jane kept getting into situations where Spider-Man had to literally rescue her from falling from cranes or from the hands of villains, Gwen is not placed in such helpless positions. Instead, as described earlier, she is able to take care of herself and does not need Spider-Man to rescue her. This does not, however, prevent the men in Gwen's life from intervening in her affairs. Her father makes Peter promise that he will end his relationship with Gwen in order to protect her. Gwen is therefore not given a choice or a say in the matter, even though she probably realizes the dangers herself (as can be deduced from the scene where she expresses her concern for Peter's wellbeing as the Spider-Man) and has still chosen to be with Peter. Furthermore, she does not receive an explanation from Peter, and instead Peter simply cuts her out of his life completely – he does not even attend her father's funeral, leaving Gwen all alone in her grief at a time when she most needs his support. It is Gwen who seeks out Peter in hopes of an explanation, but Peter only tells her that he cannot be with her without explaining why. Gwen, however, quickly realizes Peter is acting on her father's dying wish: "He made you promise, didn't he? To stay away from me, so I'd be safe" she says, and seems to give in to the decision that has been made for her (Image 14).

Image 14. Gwen accepting that her relationship status is decided for her.

Gwen's voice is therefore stripped from her as the decision to end the relationship is made for her by the two men in her life. Furthermore, she accepts it without argue. Her relationship with Peter is completely in Peter's hands, which is also evident from the final scene of the film. Peter arrives late to a class and makes promises to the teacher never to do that again, to which the teacher replies that he should not make promises that he cannot keep. As the teacher then continues on with her lesson, Peter leans towards Gwen, who is sitting in front of him, and whispers that those are the best kind of promises. Gwen smiles, instantly realizing that Peter is referring to the promise he made to her father (Image 15). Peter is letting her know that he wants to be with her again, thus making another decision regarding their relationship without asking her opinion about it.

Image 15. Gwen is pleased to know that Peter has decided to continue their relationship.

In terms of Greimas's actants, Gwen can be seen functioning as the object as well as the helper. As has been established, Gwen is quite clearly the object of Peter's desires and

she is represented in this manner multiple times and in varying ways. One such way also relates to the gaze, and was mentioned already at the beginning of this section when Gwen is portrayed as the object of Peter's gaze through the lens of his camera (as seen in Image 9). Similar objectification through gaze takes place again midway through the film. Peter arrives at Gwen's apartment and before knocking on her bedroom window to let her know he is there, he watches her through the window (Image 16). Her father also treats her as an object without a mind of her own, when he makes Peter end his relationship with her. The significance of these points is that they help represent Gwen as a plot device, furthering Peter's character and his story, rather than representing her as a self-contained character capable of making her own choices.

Image 16. Gwen is the object of Peter's gaze.

There are some improvements to Gwen's character compared to the earlier Spider-Man movies and the main female character (Mary Jane) in them, and indeed to the previous portrayal of Gwen as a minor character in *Spider-Man 3* (2007). Whereas Mary Jane was portrayed as mainly a helpless damsel who needed saving most of the time in the films, Gwen is shown to be more capable of taking care of herself. In addition, while Mary Jane was portrayed as a struggling actress and singer, and the earlier portrayal of Gwen showed her working as a model, Gwen in *The Amazing Spider-Man* is a smart, talented, and capable science student interning at Oscorp. It seems, therefore, that Gwen is given more agency in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, but she is still lacking her own voice and existence outside of Peter/Spider-Man. Now she is represented as not having a life of her own that would not revolve around Peter. In addition, decisions concerning her life

are made for her without her consent. This kind of representation of the female character conveys a message to the audience that says women, regardless of how smart and talented they are, need men to make the difficult decisions and keep them safe.

4.3 Pepper Potts

Pepper Potts is played by Gwyneth Paltrow, a white American actress, in all three *Iron Man* films, and the character also appears in *Marvel's The Avengers* film. Pepper is not given a comprehensive background story in any of the *Iron Man* films, but especially in the third installment it is assumed that the viewer already knows who she is. In the Marvel cinematic universe Pepper is Tony Stark's personal assistant turned girlfriend, and the CEO of Tony's multimillion-dollar company, Stark Industries. The character's age is not explicitly stated, but Paltrow is in her early 40s, and it is safe to assume that the character represents roughly the same age group. Pepper does not possess any superhuman qualities at the beginning of *Iron Man 3*; she is a normal human being, but she is familiar with the superhuman and extraordinary phenomena in the world through Tony.

Regarding the character's *visual appearance*, Pepper has long, reddish blonde hair; she is tall, and has a slim figure – again conforming to the same body image 'ideal' as the previous two characters. The first time Pepper is shown on screen, she is wearing an all white outfit with a tight pencil skirt, tailored blazer and high heels, representing a very feminine, yet professional and businesslike, attire (Image 17). Later in the film she is seen wearing more casual outfits such as black jeans and white shirts. Roughly half of her screen time, however, she is seen wearing only a sports bra and black pants (see Image 23), which also reveal her more toned muscles, which the film would have the audience believe are the result of the experimental formula she is injected with. This more revealing outfit also generates the following comment from Tony towards the end of the film: "Why don't you dress like this at home? Sport bra. The whole deal". Tony's

comment objectifies Pepper, suggesting that she should dress similarly at home so that Tony can have (more) pleasure in looking at her in their daily life. Pepper's attractiveness is also commented once earlier in the film by Aldrich Killian, who says that she looks "really great".

Image 17. Pepper (middle) at work.

Since the first *Iron Man* film, Pepper has advanced in her career from Tony's secretary/personal assistant to the CEO of Stark Industries, and the first scene she appears in *Iron Man 3*, she is shown at work, discussing with Happy (head of security) about his leadership skills while also multitasking and signing papers (Image 17). She is gently, in an implicit manner, criticizing Happy for being too efficient in his work ("I am thrilled that you are now the Head of Security. Okay? It's the perfect position for you. However, since you've taken the post, we've had a rise in staff complaints of 300%.-- It wasn't a compliment."). Therefore, regarding her *speech*, she is rather soft-spoken and non-confrontational while still being firm. For example, when the film's antagonist Aldrich Killian proposes business cooperation with Stark Industries, Pepper as the CEO implicitly declines his offer invoking not only the company's new policies but also Tony's preferences. However, when Killian tries to sweet talk Pepper (e.g. "-- now there's a new genius on the throne who doesn't have to answer to Tony anymore, and who has slightly less of an ego", referring to Tony's infamous ego), she firmly and explicitly tells him "[i]t's gonna be a no, Aldrich". She is smart; realizing that the product Killian is offering is "highly weaponizable" and therefore not suitable for Stark Industries.

In terms of the Bechdel test, *Iron Man 3* fares better than the two previously discussed films in that Pepper actually has conversations with another female character for several minutes. The other more prominent female character (i.e. one that is named and has dialogue) in the film is Maya Hansen, who Tony describes as being a botanist but in reality, as Maya explains it, she is "a biological DNA coder running a team of 40 of a privately funded think tank". "But sure, you can call me a botanist", she adds, irritated by Tony's belittling of her profession and talents. Pepper and Maya mainly discuss issues related to the terrorist Mandarin who causes destruction all around and also destroys Tony's mansion. Maya suspects her boss (Aldrich Killian) has something to do with the terrorist, and blames herself for inadvertently providing them with the unstable Extremis formula, which enhances its subjects with super strength, but can also cause the subjects to explode from within. Pepper tries to console Maya, telling her that she is not the one to blame. Pepper also comes across as a little suspicious of Maya at first, questioning what she wanted with Tony, as the two have a shared past, which was shown at the beginning of the film. Therefore, it is debatable whether the third requirement of the Bechdel test – the two women should talk about something other than a man/men – is realized, since their topics of discussion stem largely from the actions of men.

Image 18. Pepper manhandled by Aldrich Killian.

As regards her *behavior*, Pepper exhibits quite a few of the behavioral patterns discussed by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995). For example, at work she is the boss, therefore she must exhibit leadership in that environment. Likewise, to be able to be in charge of a multimillion-dollar company, one can assume that Pepper must be smart, therefore fulfilling the behavioral pattern of ingenuity. More prominently, however, she is a victim of physical aggression multiple times in the film. Firstly, she is attacked by one of Tony's Iron Man suits during the night by accident, because the suit interprets Pepper as a threat to Tony. Secondly, she is manhandled by Killian when he kidnaps her (Image 18). Finally, she is also tied and injected with the Extremis formula against her will. In addition, she is, to some extent, a victim of emotional abuse in the form of Tony's controlling and jealous behavior. When Pepper is in a meeting with Killian, Happy informs Tony that Pepper is meeting a "handsome scientist" and that Tony should come to the office to keep an eye on her since, as Happy says, "she is the best thing" that ever happened to Tony. This represents Pepper as a woman who cannot be trusted without male supervision, and this representation is indeed reinforced further by Pepper's reaction to Killian: she is rendered speechless by Killian's improved good looks (earlier it is shown that Killian used to be a cripple and his appearance was less groomed) and when Killian kisses her on the cheek to say goodbye, it appears she might even want to kiss him back (Image 19). The film seems to subtly question Pepper's loyalty to Tony to lay foundation to the following scene.

Image 19. Pepper might be swayed by Aldrich Killian's charm after all.

Once Pepper arrives home later that evening, she is greeted by an Iron Man suit in the living room. She assumes Tony is inside the suit but soon finds out the suit is empty and Tony is talking to her through a headset from the garage, which is his workspace. The following conversation ensues:

> Pepper: This is a new level of lame.
> Tony: Sorry.
> P: You ate without me already? On date night?
> T: He was just…
> P: You mean you.
> T: Well, yeah, I just mean we were just hosting you…
> P: (scoffs in disbelief)
> T:...while I finished up a little work.
> P: Uh-huh.
> T: And yes, I had a quick bite. I didn't know if you were coming home or you were having drinks with Aldrich Killian.
> P: (her jaw drops in disbelief) Aldrich Killian? What, are you checking up on me?
> T: Happy was concerned.
> P: No, you're spying on me.
> T: I wasn't.

Tony comes across as jealous and unappreciative of Pepper, as he does not even take the time to greet her in person when she comes home. In addition, he does not respect the plans they have made together, and instead acts rather immaturely out of jealousy. Pepper is upset with him and she is about to storm off, when Tony owns up to his behavior and apologizes. Tony explains his behavior is the result of the trauma he suffered in New York City when the Avengers were fighting aliens and he nearly died. His behavior is thus justified by the horrors he went through, and Pepper is expected to forgive him – which she does. The audience is likewise expected to understand Tony and relate to his side of things more, by calling Pepper's loyalty into question in the earlier scene, therefore making her seem as the unreasonable one for accusing Tony of spying, as well as by portraying Tony as vulnerable and remorseful.

Pepper is also used as an incentive for Tony by Killian (Image 20). Killian kidnaps Pepper in order to motivate Tony to help him stabilize the Extremis formula. He has injected Pepper with the formula, telling Tony that she is in extreme pain, and if her body rejects the formula, she will die. Tony is therefore set on a course to rescue

helpless Pepper. Therefore, Pepper is an object of reward as well, and not only for Tony should he succeed in saving her, but Killian also regards her as a reward. In a scene where Killian has Pepper tied, she tells him that Tony will not help him. Killian then admits that getting Tony to cooperate is not the only reason he kidnapped Pepper.

> Killian: It's more, uh, embarrassing than that. You're here as my, uh…
> Pepper: Trophy.
> Killian: Yeah.

This exchange could also be seen as a kind of a meta-level commentary on superhero films, and on action films in general, where women are often used as trophies by the male characters: the hero saves the day and gets the girl – or, in this case for example, the villain feels entitled to take the woman regardless of her own desires. This pattern can be seen having become so normal and usual that even the women themselves – i.e. Pepper in this scene – realize and recognize it.

Image 20. Pepper is used as an incentive for Tony.

Pepper rescues Tony twice in the film, albeit both of these times are made possible by a man. The first time is when Tony's mansion is bombed. Previously Tony has taunted the terrorist Mandarin on television, giving out his home address to the whole world. Pepper urges them to leave the mansion, but Tony refuses. He literally says "[t]he man says no", signifying that the man of the house makes the decisions and has the final word, which is a very patriarchal view representing women as incapable of making decisions and being in charge. Their argument is cut short when a missile hits the

mansion. In order to shield Pepper from the explosion, Tony uses his remote control Iron Man suit and seals Pepper inside it. Pepper then saves Tony from being crushed under falling rubble (Image 21). "I got you", she says, to which Tony replies "I got you first", making sure that both Pepper and the audience know that he is the original hero here who made it possible for Pepper to save him in the first place. Then he says "[a]s I was saying, we can't stay here", making it as though it was his idea all along to leave the house, further asserting him as the man who makes the decisions.

Image 21. Pepper saves Tony in his Iron Man suit.

The second time Pepper rescues Tony is at the end of the final battle scene. Tony has come to a shipyard to rescue Pepper from Killian. She is dangling from a crane and Tony is unable to reach her, so he urges her to let go and promises to catch her. The crane moves suddenly, causing Pepper to fall into a sea of flames. Failing to catch her, Tony watches as Pepper falls to what appears is her inevitable death (Image 22). Pepper's supposed death scene is what pushes Tony to end Aldrich Killian – who by this point has been revealed as the true Mandarin – once and for all: he suits up in his Iron Man suit and confronts Killian, and an epic battle between the two ensues.

Image 22. Pepper Potts falls to her supposed death.

At one point it appears Tony has finally defeated Killian by blowing him up. Killian, however, emerges from the flames relatively unharmed due to the Extremis formula. He approaches unarmed Tony, but Pepper, who also survived the fall thanks to Extremis, suddenly smacks Killian in the head with a heavy pipe (Image 23), thus saving Tony. Tony is dumbfounded, but before there can be a happy reunion between the two, one of the Iron Man suits targets Pepper because of her Extremis heat signature which differs from that of a normal person. In an acrobatic choreography, Pepper disarms the suit in mid air with her new super soldier powers, and then proceeds to destroying Killian with an explosion for good. Afterwards she is crouched almost like a rabid animal, seemingly shocked by her own powers (Image 24). She turns to Tony and says: "Oh my god. That was really violent", thus drawing attention to her unusual behavior. The comment can also be seen drawing attention to women in general as unlikely distributors of violence (see also Scott and Dargis 2014; Gilpatric 2010) – especially 'good' characters such as Pepper. Exhibiting such violence is therefore not seen as normal or proper behavior for female characters such as Pepper, and needs to be addressed by the character herself. When Tony tries to approach her, she is scared that her skin will burn him and asks in a scared manner whether she will be all right. Tony assures her that he will be able to make her better, in other words, remove her new powers altogether, although Pepper also comments that she now understands Tony's obsession with his Iron Man suits, implying that she could get used to the strength and power. "That's what I do. I fix stuff", he says, and a little later Tony's voiceover explains

that he was, indeed, able to fix Pepper, thus portraying the man as benevolent and omnipotent.

Image 23. Extremis-Pepper saves Tony.

Image 24. Pepper is shocked by her own violent behavior.

Considering which Greimas's actants best apply to Pepper's character in light of the examples discussed earlier, it appears Pepper mainly functions as the object. Although she has moments of agency, such as when she destroys the Iron Man suit and Killian, and saves Tony, the action is not inherently hers. Instead, it is generated by the power and instincts given to her by a man; as seen in the scene described above, she is shocked by her own actions because they are the influence of something alien in her and she is clearly not in control of it. Thus, she is rather an object being used against her own will than her own person in control of her own actions. In addition, she is an object in the sense that she is used as leverage over Tony, and Tony has to rescue her.

Pepper's *function* in the film is mainly to provide an incentive for Tony, and to be a willing partner in Tony's eccentric (and egocentric) life. What is positive about the

character is that she is represented in a high-ranking position at a huge company, and that she is given chances to stand up for herself and act heroically – even if these chances are ultimately made possible by the actions of a man. The film, however, makes sure in every turn to underline to the audience who the true hero in the film is (Tony). In addition, Pepper's achievements and social life seem to be dependent on Tony: as much as she may deserve it, she most likely would not be the CEO of Stark Industries without her relationship with Tony, and she is also not shown having any female friends – her social interaction is limited to Tony and the people she meets through work.

4.4 Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow

Natasha Romanoff, also known as the Black Widow, is the main female character in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (henceforth *CA: TWS*). By *CA: TWS*, Black Widow has appeared in two other Marvel films; *Iron Man 2* and *Marvel's The Avengers*. Despite appearing across the different Marvel franchises, Black Widow has not been given a comprehensive background and origin story on film, unlike the majority of the male heroes she is associated with. Her past has only been hinted at in the different films, essentially resulting in the audience knowing only that she used to be a KGB spy and was later recruited to S.H.I.E.L.D.[17] by Nick Fury. It is suggested that she has done some very questionable things during her career as a KGB spy – which is why she joined S.H.I.E.L.D. to atone for the things she did (as she mentions in *The Avengers*, "I've got red in my ledger, I'd like to wipe it out").

She has a very specific skill set due to her spy training, and as Nick Fury explains to Captain America when he confronts Fury about an assignment given to Black Widow without his knowledge, "Agent Romanoff is comfortable with everything", implying that she will not hesitate to complete a mission even if it requires committing

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[17] See section 3.4.4 for more information.

questionable actions. Indeed, she will even cause pain to herself to ensure the mission, as becomes evident in a scene where she uses her signature weapon – electroshock devices called the Black Widow bites – on herself to disable a potentially fatal electric device that Pierce (the main antagonist) planted on her. Her self-sacrificing act gives Fury a chance to shoot Pierce, thus bringing their mission to an end. She is also portrayed being extremely loyal to Fury and thinking very highly of him, which is why, upon learning that Fury was not sure whether he could trust anyone – including her –, she appears to be the most affected by Fury's decision to keep her in the dark about his plan to fake his own death (Image 25).

Image 25. Natasha seems hurt by Fury not trusting her.

The character is portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, a white American actress in her early 30s. As regards Black Widow's (henceforth Natasha) *visual appearance*, she is portrayed having red shoulder length hair and a slim figure, while still maintaining her curves. Her appearance is commented on once by Steve: Natasha shows him a scar that she has on her stomach and comments "[b]ye-bye, bikinis", to which Steve replies sarcastically: "Yeah, I bet you look terrible in them now", implying that even with the scar she would have no problem wearing and looking good in bikinis. Natasha's clothing in *CA: TWS* differs quite a lot from her attire in the previous films she has appeared in. Whereas in *The Avengers* she is seen wearing mainly her Black Widow combat outfit, which is a skintight black one-piece, in *CA: TWS* she is seen wearing the combat outfit in only one scene (Image 27). The combat suit is similar in appearance to that of Catwoman's, apart from the material, which in Natasha's suit appears to be more flexible and practical,

rather than tight leather. However, most of the time in the film she is seen wearing more casual and practical clothing such as a hoodie, a top, and jeans (see Image 30). This is explained by the fact that in the film, Natasha and Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America, are forced to go on the run from their employer, S.H.I.E.L.D., which turns out to be infiltrated by the enemy organization Hydra. Thus, being on the run in her Black Widow combat outfit would not be practical in terms of hiding and blending in.

In addition to more casual appearance, Natasha is portrayed rather casual in terms of her *speech* as well. For example, she is portrayed having a more humorous side through various scenes, which provides the character with a new dimension that has not been explored (to similar extent at least) in the previous films she has appeared in. When she first appears in the film, she arrives in a black sports car to pick up Steve from his morning run. She rolls down the passenger side window and addresses Steve and another man he is talking to, Sam: "Hey fellas. Either one you know where the Smithsonian [museum] is? I'm here to pick up a fossil". She is making friendly fun of Steve, who is over 90 years old despite looking like a young man. In another scene where Steve and Natasha have found a secret bunker with extremely old computers, she makes a joking popular culture reference when she says "[s]hall we play a game?" and begins to explain Steve that the line is from a popular movie (*WarGames* 1983) before Steve interrupts her saying he has seen it.

In addition, Natasha frequently tries to encourage Steve to go on a date with someone, suggesting different women he might like. This becomes an on-going comic relief in the film, as Natasha brings up the subject of dating in unlikely situations. For example, in a scene where Steve, Natasha, and the rest of their team invade a ship to rescue hostages, Natasha parachutes on the ship's deck next to Steve and continues a conversation they started in the airplane about Steve's love life. "What about the nurse that lives across the hall from you? She seems kind of nice", Natasha suggests to Steve, who replies that she needs to go secure the engine room, i.e. do her real job, before finding him a date. "I'm multitasking", Natasha replies as she heads towards the engine room, indicating

that she can handle doing more than one task at a time. Similarly in a scene where Natasha has just thrown a man down from the roof of a skyscraper as part of a scare tactic, she turns to Steve and casually says: "Oh, wait. What about that girl from Accounting, Laura…". Natasha also comes across as quite flirtatious. For example, when she sneaks behind one of the thugs in the ship's engine room, and he turns around to face her, she smiles flirtatiously and says "[h]ey sailor" (Image 26), before proceeding to disarm him.

Image 26. "Hey sailor."

Despite being portrayed as more casual and humorous in this film, Natasha remains a highly skilled close combat fighter capable of taking down multiple men single-handedly. Therefore, in terms of different *behavioral patterns* (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995), Natasha shows physical aggression many times in the film. She also proves to be extremely resourceful in a combat situation. For example, in the ship fight scene she disables a man by wrapping a wire around his neck, and then uses him as an anchor for the wire so that she can descend a shaft while shooting the enemies along the way (Image 27). In another fight scene, she tricks the Winter Soldier character with a recording of her own voice to lure him into a trap so that she can attack him from behind (Image 28). Although she is a victim of physical aggression in the film as well, she cannot be described as completely helpless or incapable of defending herself, even though Steve saves her a few times in fights, mainly shielding her from explosions, and once from the Winter Soldier, who has shot Natasha and is about to shoot her again when Steve intervenes.

Image 27. Natasha is a confident and resourceful fighter.

Image 28. Natasha attacks the Winter Soldier after tricking him.

In *CA: TWS* the audience also gets to see more of Natasha's ingenuity outside of her fighting skills. She is shown being a skillful hacker throughout the film. For example, her technological skills play an integral part in the film's end result when she hacks into the S.H.I.E.L.D./Hydra files and reveals them all to the entire world in order to destroy the organization. Even when she is unable to decrypt a file on a memory stick in an earlier scene, she comes up with a way to find out where the file came from, thus helping her and Steve along on their mission. She is also confident in herself, as she herself says: "The person who developed this [the encryption] is slightly smarter than me. Slightly". On the other hand, however, a degree of her confidence in herself might be a facade, as she also mentions at one point in the film that she only acts like she knows everything.

Her ingenuity manifests itself also in the way that she solves threatening situations. Natasha and Steve are forced to go on the run from their former employers and they go

to a shopping mall in disguise to find out the contents of an encrypted memory stick. At a computer store an employee inquiring if they need any assistance approaches them. Without hesitation, Natasha comes up with a cover story for her and Steve, telling the employee that they are looking for honeymoon destinations. Her demeanor changes from concentrated and serious to bubbly, and even her voice becomes higher. Whereas Steve is bemused and does not know what to say or how to act, she assumes a completely different persona seemingly effortlessly in an instant (Image 29). In the following scene, they are making their way out of the shopping mall when Steve spots two agents walking towards them in the crowd. Whereas Steve then views their surroundings in a military fashion, coming up with a fighting strategy, Natasha has a different outlook: she firmly tells Steve to put his arm around her and "laugh at something I said", thus making the two of them blend into the crowd of people unnoticed by the hostile agents (Image 30). Similarly, when they are going down on an escalator, Natasha notices a familiar agent on the opposite side of the escalator going up, and orders Steve to kiss her so that they will again go unnoticed by the agent. Steve is again completely puzzled by her utterance, not seeing her strategy behind it, so Natasha takes control of the situation and kisses him. Her strategy works as the agent looks away from them uncomfortably, and they are able to leave the shopping mall without getting caught. These scenes demonstrate her quick wits and ability to adapt to her surroundings. They also demonstrate her spy training in comparison to Steve's military training: her mind works to find a solution that will keep the two of them under the radar, whereas Steve is ready to fight their way through the enemies.

Image 29. Natasha taking on a different personality in an instant.

Image 30. Natasha's strategy: blending in with the crowd.

In contrast to her hardcore professionalism as an agent, she is also portrayed showing emotion in various situations. For example, she seems devastated after Nick Fury is shot and presumably killed. She also shows her vulnerable side after they learn that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by Hydra all along. She and Steve are resting at Sam's apartment after a missile attack they survived, and Steve notices that she has something on her mind:

> Steve: What's going on?
> Natasha: When I first joined SHIELD I thought I was going straight. But I guess I just traded in the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but I guess I can't tell the difference anymore.
> S: There's a chance you might be in the wrong business.
> N: I owe you.
> S: It's okay.
> N: If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life, now you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it?
> S: I would now. And I'm always honest.

This exchange demonstrates her opening up to Steve and telling him something personal, thus giving the character more depth and humane characteristics to identify with, rather than portraying her as a trained killer with a humorous side. This scene also furthers the relationship between her and Steve. Whereas earlier in the film they seem unsure of whether they can trust each other (as Steve says, he trusts her to save him *now*, implying that he did not trust her to do so before), this exchange helps develop their relationship into a mutually trusting friendship.

Since the character's existence and storyline spans more than one film, it is possible for viewers who are familiar with the other two films Natasha's character has appeared in (*Iron Man 2* and *The Avengers*) to detect some character development as well. For example, when Natasha hacks into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s secret files intending to make them public, the antagonistic Director Pierce tries to stop her by saying that by revealing all of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s secrets she will be revealing all the secrets from her own past as well. "Are you ready for that?" he taunts her, and for a moment it appears he might be able to sway her, as she stops typing and looks slightly uncertain. She, however, quickly recovers and looks at Pierce as if to challenge him and says: "Are you?" (Image 31). In the brief moment when she appears to hesitate, it seems she comes to terms with what doing the greater good will mean to her as an individual, and whereas before she might have considered her own anonymity and secrecy more important, she now decides to do the more heroic act.

Image 31. Natasha is ready to reveal her secrets if it means taking down Hydra.

Similarly, towards the end of the film Natasha is being questioned by the Senate about the events that took place at S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters and she at first looks intimidated by the possibility of being arrested for all her past crimes as a KGB agent. She quickly regains her confidence, though, and gives the following speech to the senators before walking out of the hearing (Image 32):

> You're not going to put me in a prison. You're not going to put any of us in a prison. You know why? Because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place, and yes, we help make it that way. But we're also the ones best qualified to defend it. So, if you want to arrest me, arrest me. You'll know where to find me.

In this scene she appears to realize her own value as one of the people capable of defending the world (the 'us' refers to the rest of the Avengers). Her speech demonstrates her confidence in that she is doing the right thing to make up for the "red" in her ledger, in other words, she seems to realize that the good she is doing now can eventually outdo the horrible things in her past. She appears to gain new faith in herself and the work she is doing.

Image 32. Natasha's facial expression demonstrates confidence.

In terms of Greimas's actants, Natasha is mainly a helper, but she can also be seen as the subject in some scenes. Especially in scenes where she is interacting with Steve and she takes the initiative and leadership position, for example, in the shopping mall scene that was discussed earlier. In many ways she is a very independent, active character in the film, capable of making choices for herself. For example, compared to the previously analyzed female characters, Natasha is the first one to not have any decisions made for her by the male characters. Although, in terms of the actants, she is strictly speaking a helper (helping Steve on his mission to destroy Hydra, Steve remains the main hero in the film), she is closer to an equal partner with a contributive set of skills than a mere sidekick.

CA: TWS cannot, however, be called a 'perfect' example of female representation. Among other things, the film fails the Bechdel test. Natasha only interacts with other male characters, and while there are two other minor female characters that represent strong, capable women with a great deal of potential, their roles in the film are minimal

and they are reduced to the sidelines, only appearing on screen for a few minutes. The film also succumbs to using camera angles that specifically accentuate Natasha's physical attributes. For example, in the ship fight scene, the camera focuses on Natasha's backside when she knocks out a guy with a pipe (Image 33). The focus is therefore on her physical attributes (i.e. her bottom) rather than her action.
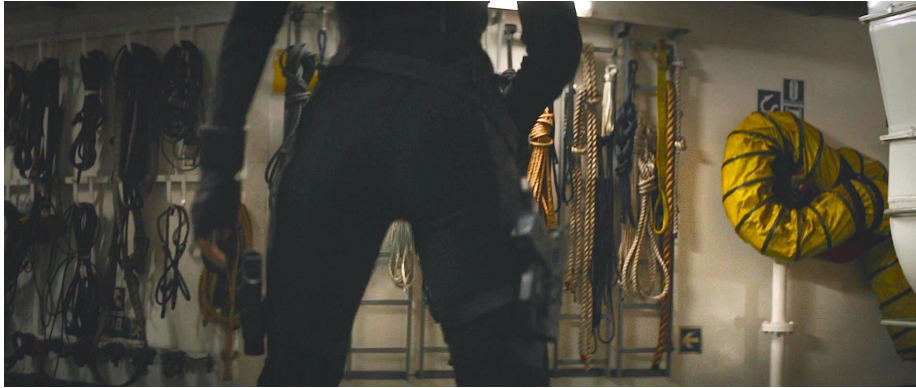

Image 33. The focus is on Natasha's physical attributes rather than her action.

Although not a perfect example, *CA: TWS* seems to represent an improvement in representing its main female character compared to the earlier three films in general. From the point of view of analyzing the character, it is more difficult to find similar flaws in her portrayal than, for example, in Pepper Potts's character. Natasha is not used as incentive, her abilities are not the result of the antagonist's desire to torment the male hero, and furthermore, no one wants to take her skills away in order to depower her. Instead, her skill set is embraced by her peers. Natasha *functions* as a valuable ally to Captain America, and while it is clear that Steve/Captain America is the main protagonist, Natasha plays an important role in the film and is treated almost as an equal in terms of her abilities and representation of her as a multifaceted person.

4.5 Gamora

Gamora, the main female character in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, is portrayed by Zoe Saldana, an American actress in her early 30s, who is half Puerto Rican and half

Dominican, making her the only actress in this study to represent an ethnicity other than Caucasian, and hence show some ethnic diversity. The character differs from the previous female characters in that Gamora is not a human, and therefore her appearance differs slightly from that of a normal human. The entire film, in fact, takes place in space, on alien planets, allowing for diversity in all the characters' appearances. As Gamora has green skin in the film, the fact that a non-Caucasian actress portrays her goes easily unnoticed by those who are not familiar with Saldana. Gamora does not get a similar, sentimental introduction and background story as the male hero Peter, who is shown at the beginning of the film as a young child whose mother dies, and who is then abducted by a spaceship, thus also establishing him as the main protagonist of the film. She does, however, get a scene where she tells Peter about her past: she is the adopted daughter of the Mad Titan, Thanos, who raised her in a cruel environment after murdering her real parents in front of her. Thanos tortured her in order to make her a weapon. There is also a scene in which Gamora has been detained by the Nova police, and one of the police officers describes her as "[s]urgically modified and trained as a living weapon". She has an adopted sister, Nebula, and together the sisters act as Thanos's most deadly assassins. Gamora and Nebula are in fact presented as commodities owned by Thanos, as the Nova police says: "Recently, Thanos lent her and her sister Nebula out to Ronan, which leads us to believe that Thanos and Ronan are working together".

As regards the character's *visual appearance*, she resembles a human although she represents an alien race (Image 34). She has green skin and her cheekbones are slightly elevated and sharper than a human's would be. Her hair is red and black, and she has a slim, slightly muscular figure. Her outfits consist mostly of leather pants and tops, a leather jacket, and in the end of the film she wears a leather miniskirt. When she is sent to prison, she wears the same yellow inmate's outfit as the other inmates. Her outfits cannot be described as hypersexualized or particularly revealing: they do not expose much of her skin apart from her arms and legs occasionally, and neither is exposed at the same time. There is, however, a scene in which the camera shows a close-up of

Gamora zipping her leather jacket with nothing underneath it (Image 35). The scene is featured in a montage where the characters are shown getting ready for battle, and Rocket Raccoon, for example, is shown choosing a weapon. Therefore, it seems unnecessary that the only female character, who is also no less of a fighter than the male characters, is shown getting ready for battle only through her choice of clothing and getting dressed. This kind of representation of the female character in comparison to the male characters acts as undermining her activeness: whereas the male characters are shown handling their weapons and making sure that they work, she is shown from the neck down, zipping up her jacket, which in comparison to the actions of the male characters seems rather passive by emphasizing her body and outfit.

Image 34. Gamora is introduced in the film.

Image 35. Gamora is shown getting ready for battle.

In terms of how the other characters perceive her appearance, it is mentioned in a scene where the main characters plan to escape from the prison they are in, that a group referred to as the "bald bodies" find Gamora attractive. Rocket Raccoon then suggests that Gamora could work out a "trade of some sorts" with them, so that they can obtain

the means to escape. It is therefore suggested between the lines that as an attractive woman Gamora could trade her body in exchange for escape. It is difficult to imagine Rocket making such a suggestion to a man because it is not expected of a man to use his attractiveness to his advantage in the same way as a woman. The woman's body is therefore in a sense represented as more expendable, or as a commodity to be traded. Gamora's reaction to Rocket's suggestion is disbelieving, reflecting a woman who cannot believe someone just suggested something like that to her, as she says "[y]ou must be joking". Rocket's reply ("No, I really heard they find you attractive"), however, dismisses the obscenity of the suggested prostitution, and instead focuses on the question of whether Gamora is, or can be, considered attractive or not.

Peter also finds Gamora attractive and he tries to make a move on her a few times in the film. For example, after they have escaped from the prison, Gamora leads the group to a new planet to meet a potential buyer for the Orb. While they wait for the buyer, Gamora and Peter have a long conversation against the backdrop of a beautiful scenery. At one point Peter places his headphones on Gamora so that she can listen to the romantic song playing in his Walkman. They stand very close together and Peter takes Gamora's hand in an attempt to dance with her. They are almost about to kiss (Image 36), when Gamora suddenly puts a knife on Peter's throat, pushes him away, and yells: "No! I know who you are Peter Quill! And I am not some starry-eyed waif here to succumb to your- your pelvic sorcery!" (Image 37). The film breaks the familiar mold of the main female and male characters entering a romantic relationship with each other by having Gamora recognize where the moment is heading and refusing to follow the path that the audience is also expecting the characters to follow. The scene therefore functions as a sort of a meta comment on the genre by giving Gamora agency to choose differently rather than having her do what the genre conventions traditionally expect of her, which is to fall for the handsome and charming leading hero.
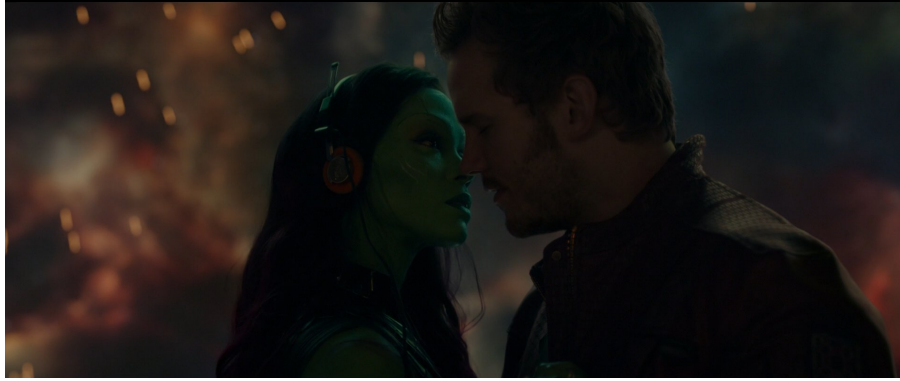
Image 36. Gamora and Peter almost share a kiss.

Image 37. Gamora will not succumb to Peter's charm.

In terms of *speech*, Gamora comes across as rather archaic and formal both through her vocabulary and her way of speaking. For example, she tells Peter that he has "the bearing of a man of honor" when she first meets him. Later, however, she says to Peter that she has "no words for an honorless thief". She also tells Peter at one point that she is "a warrior and an assassin. I do not dance", which further makes her appear as quite tense in terms of her social skills. In addition, she takes Peter's expression of people having "sticks up their butts" literally, wondering "[w]ho put the sticks up their butts? That is cruel". Her manner of speech distinguishes the character from the other characters in the film as well as the other female characters in this study, representing her as slightly socially challenged and, in a way, also as an atypical female character by emphasizing her life as a stoic warrior (e.g. honor is strongly associated with warriors), which is typically seen as more masculine.

Further regarding speech, the film does not fare very well in the Bechdel test. Gamora mostly interacts with male characters, which is not a surprise since – similarly to the other films as well – the majority of the characters are male. She exchanges a few lines of dialogue with her sister Nebula here and there, but they do not amount to a full conversation[18]. Gamora tries to plead with Nebula a couple of times so that she would join Gamora in stopping Ronan, but Nebula is filled with hatred towards Gamora (even though she says that out of all their siblings, she hated Gamora the least). Nebula is portrayed as a very flat character in that she is single-minded in her hatred towards Gamora and Thanos, and she can be summed up into a single overbearing characteristic: hate.

Considering the different *behavioral patterns* (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995), Gamora shows a great deal of physical aggression. As has already been mentioned, she is a trained assassin, and therefore extremely skilled at combat. In a scene where she attempts to steal the Orb from Peter, she dominates the close combat, gaining upper hand over Peter repeatedly (Image 38) – it is only Peter's gadgets, and when Rocket and Groot interfere, that he is able to escape from her. She also has a fight scene with Nebula (Image 39), which is the first and only all-female fight scene in the films analyzed in this study. Despite her tough exterior, Gamora also shows affection and concern. For example, at the end of their fight scene, Nebula is about to fall from the spaceship they are on, and Gamora tries to save her by offering her hand to Nebula. Even though they have a difficult relationship, Gamora still seems to care about Nebula, who, however, cannot get past her hatred and would rather fall than be saved by her sister.

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[18] Interestingly, a lengthier scene including a conversation between Gamora and Nebula can be found in the Blu-ray disc's deleted scenes extras.

Image 38. Gamora gets the upper hand in a fight with Peter.

Image 39. Gamora and Nebula fight scene.

In addition, she tells Peter that when she learned that Ronan and Thanos wanted to destroy an entire planet with the Orb's power, she could not stand by and let that happen, which shows that she cares about others and is not as cruel and emotionless as, for example, her father and sister are. Therefore, Gamora also demonstrates leadership and initiative when she decides to go against her father and Ronan and betray them. Although Peter is portrayed as the leader of the group as well as the main protagonist, it is in fact Gamora who sets the film's events into motion with her betrayal. Whereas Drax is after revenge and Peter, Rocket, and Groot are originally all after money – whether wanting to sell the Orb for profit or to collect a bounty –, Gamora's motivation is to save Xandar, the planet Ronan and Thanos want to destroy. It is her motivation to save lives and do the right thing that eventually brings the group together and guides them towards saving the galaxy.

Gamora also constantly reminds the group of the importance of protecting the Orb from Ronan. For example, after the group witnesses the destructive power of the Orb, Gamora insists that they should take the Orb to the Nova police who might be able to contain it (Image 40). She emphasizes to Peter that they cannot allow Ronan to get his hands on the Orb. Peter, however, suggests instead that they could still sell the Orb to someone "really nice for a whole lot of money", thus showing that Peter still does not care about saving innocent lives as much as he cares about making money. Gamora calls him despicable and dishonorable. In a later scene when the rest of the group is bickering about irrelevant matters, Gamora is the one to bring their focus back to the task at hand, i.e. getting the Orb back from Ronan after he obtained it from them.

Image 40. Gamora does not want the Orb to fall into Ronan's hands.

In addition, when Gamora and Peter are held captive in Peter's "foster father" Yondu's spaceship, Gamora pleads with Yondu that they must get the Orb back from Ronan or otherwise billions will die. Yondu belittles Gamora by calling her a "girl" and accuses Peter for letting Gamora fill him with sentiment, thus dismissing her as nothing but a sentimental girl. It is only when Peter promises that if Yondu agrees to help them, they would give the Orb to him and he could make profit off of it that Yondu gives in. Therefore the men in the film are portrayed as only interested in making a profit rather than saving lives, yet it is Peter who eventually gets most of the credit for being the hero.

The film establishes Peter as the main hero instead of Gamora – whose idea it ultimately is to stop Ronan – by accrediting him with wanting to do the right thing. In a scene where the group is still debating whether they all want to be a part of the mission, Peter gives a speech that resembles a traditional motivational speech the heroes often give:

> When I look around, you know what I see? Losers. I mean like, folks who have lost stuff. And we have, man, we have, all of us. Homes, and our families, normal lives. And you think life takes more than it gives, but not today. Today it's giving us something. It is giving us a chance. –– To give a shit. For once, and not run away. And I for one am not gonna stand by and watch as Ronan wipes out billions of innocent lives.

Following his speech, Rocket says that stopping Ronan would be impossible, and that Peter is asking them to die for this cause, placing Peter in a leadership position where he can ask for such a sacrifice from his "troops". Drax also acknowledges Peter as the leader when he says "[y]ou are an honorable man Quill. I will fight beside you". After a moment, Gamora addresses Peter: "Quill, I have lived most of my life surrounded by my enemies. I will be grateful to die among my friends". Gamora's utterance is significant in two ways. For one, it shows a clear shift in leadership as Gamora seems to also recognize Peter as their leader. As has been established, Gamora has been the one to try to get the group to stop Ronan up until this point. In this scene, however, it appears as though Gamora has only now made up her mind about standing up against Ronan. From this moment onward, Peter acts more clearly as a leader: he comes up with a plan to defeat Ronan, and gives orders to others. Second, the utterance signals a defining moment for the character in the sense that she explicitly acknowledges Peter, Rocket, Drax and Groot as her friends, which likely means that she trusts them. Judging by her past, and also by the fact that she says she has been surrounded by enemies most of her life, it is evident that the concept of friends is something quite new to her, and that she most likely has not been able to trust anyone before in her life, thus signifying a major change in her character.

Further concerning the behavioral patterns, Gamora is also a victim of both physical and verbal aggression. When she is arrested and sent to a maximum security prison

alongside Peter, Rocket and Groot, she receives a great deal of hate from the other inmates. The inmates throw things at her, yelling "[y]ou're a scum!", "[m]urderer!", "[n]o cell's gonna protect you for long", and other threats at her to intimidate her (Image 41). Rocket explains Peter that many of the inmates have lost their families to Ronan and "his goons", and since Gamora is associated with Ronan, she becomes the target for revenge by way of affiliation. Gamora appears rather unaffected, saying "[w]hatever nightmares the future holds, are dreams compared to what's behind me". The only time she shows any emotion or a sign of being affected by the others is when she is sitting in her cell and an inmate charges against the see-through cell door: she flinches and gasps, but quickly resumes to staring ahead with a blank face. Drax also refers to Gamora as a "wench", a derogatory word to use of a woman. He also calls her a "green whore" (albeit in a sentence where he is about to call her a friend), to which Gamora angrily replies that he has to stop with the degrading name-calling.

Image 41. Gamora remains largely unaffected by the angry mob.

Peter rescues Gamora twice in the film. The first time is when a guard allows some of the inmates to take Gamora from her cell during the night and take her to be killed. Drax, who wants to kill Gamora himself because Ronan murdered his wife and daughter, interrupts them. Therefore Gamora is again made the scapegoat for Ronan's crimes. Gamora sees an opportunity and disarms the inmates, holding knives on Drax's throat and on the other inmate's throat. "I'm no family to Ronan or Thanos", she says between gritted teeth before backing away and lowering the knives to show that she has no desire to kill the men. She offers her help to kill Ronan, but Drax attacks her,

pushing her against the wall by her throat, choking her. "Woman, your words mean nothing to me", he says. The way Drax emphasizes Gamora's gender is interesting, because it is difficult to imagine that, were she a man, Drax would have said "man, your words mean nothing to me". The word emphasis seems to suggest that when the words are coming from a woman, they have less value than they would have coming from a man. Gamora is saved when Peter interferes, persuading Drax to let her go because she is of more value alive than dead. Peter's motivation to save her is purely because he thinks she can help him sell the Orb, and he tells her that explicitly as they are walking back to their cells: "Listen, I could care less whether you live or whether you die".

The second time Peter rescues Gamora is after Nebula has blown up a vessel Gamora was in, leaving her floating in space on the brink of death (Image 42). Peter sacrifices his own life to save hers. He gives his space mask to Gamora, even though without it he will almost surely die. To emphasize his heroic sacrifice, a pompous score plays in the background of the scene.

Image 42. Gamora is left to die in space, so Peter rescues her.

They are both saved by Yondu, who transfers them onto his ship. They are gasping for breath on the floor of the ship and Peter is lying on top of Gamora. Gamora looks at him puzzled by what happened. Peter begins to explain: "I saw you out there. I don't know what came over me. But I couldn't let you die. I found something inside of myself. Something incredibly heroic. I mean, not to brag, but objectively…". During his speech, Gamora's facial expression shows hints of affection (Image 43), but by the end of his

speech she is visibly annoyed by him and his bragging (Image 44). The scene can again be seen as a sort of a meta comment on the genre: it starts out as a (stereo)typical moment between the male hero and the girl after he has rescued her. The audience is led to believe that this is the moment when the hero finally gets the girl and they kiss. The touching moment is, however, ruined when Peter vocalizes his heroism – something that rarely, if ever, happens, therefore it is breaking the conventions of the genre – and Gamora seems to remember again how immature and annoying he really is.

Image 43. Gamora looking affectionately at Peter.

Image 44. Gamora is not impressed by Peter's bragging.

In terms of Greimas's actants, Gamora can be seen evolving from one actant to another to some extent. For example, when taking into consideration that Peter is portrayed as the main hero and protagonist, then Gamora can be seen representing an opponent at the beginning of the film, as she tries to steal the Orb from Peter and engages in a fight with him. She, however, goes from being the opponent to being a helper when she agrees to work with the other characters in order to sell the Orb, and later when they

team up to stop Ronan. She can, however, also be considered representing the subject actant since she demonstrates quite a bit of agency and initiative in making her own choices. As has been mentioned earlier, Gamora can be seen as the underlying force that sets the film's events into motion; therefore she can also be considered the sender (or power) actant, instigating action not only in herself but also in the other characters. As is therefore evident, Gamora cannot be clearly assigned with a single actant, which makes her a more rounded character.

Guardians of the Galaxy represents Gamora as a strong, active character capable of choosing her own path. Whereas her adopted sister Nebula seems to rather blindly follow orders and give in to the life she has been raised in, Gamora chooses to take action against her tyrant adoptive father instead of standing by and watching innocent people die. The film also breaks genre conventions, thus surprising the audience, for example by having the main female character and the main male character *not* get into a romantic relationship with each other – the only film besides *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* to do so in this study. The film, however, still complies with the existing genre convention that the main hero needs to be male, even though it begins to deconstruct it under the immediate surface of the film by portraying Gamora as sort of an unsung heroine, who instigates the action behind the scenes. Thus, not to upset the traditional gender roles too much, Peter's status as the leader of the group as well as the main hero is installed once and for all at the end of the film when Gamora smilingly says: "We'll follow your lead, Star-Lord".

This concludes my analysis of the five female characters. The next section provides a concluding discussion of the present study. It includes a summary of the main findings in relation to the research questions and previous research, discussion on what it all means in terms of implications and applications of the present study, limitations of the current study, and finally, some suggestions for future research which could continue investigating similar themes and provide some new information on the topic of representation of female characters in the superhero genre.

5 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The present study examined the representations of the main female characters in five superhero action films. The aim was to find out what sorts of representations of women are conveyed in the films through a detailed analysis of each character. The following two research questions were formulated to fulfill this aim:

1. How are the main female characters in the superhero comic book film adaptations represented through
    a) visual appearance and ethnicity
    b) speech
    c) behavior?

2. How do the main female characters function and/or not function in the films' storylines?

In this chapter I will discuss the findings of my analysis, first in relation to the research questions, and then in relation to previous research. Discussion on the possible implications and applications of the present study follows in section 5.3, after which I will evaluate the execution of the present study in section 5.4, and finally, give some suggestions for future research in section 5.5.

5.1 Findings in relation to the research questions

The present study utilized critical discourse analysis as an openly critical approach to the analysis and discussion of the findings from the viewpoint of the oppressed (i.e. women). Textual analysis methods, such as making observations on each character's visual appearance, clothing, speech and behavior, were used as foundation for the analysis. In addition, the actantial model by Greimas was utilized in helping determine how the characters function in the films' storylines. The male gaze term was used in the present study to account for imagery that clearly objectifies the women and seems to appeal to the male audience specifically – however, it must be noted that the male gaze theory is more complex than that and quite controversial as well as it does not take into

consideration the female or homosexual spectator. Thus, not too much emphasis was placed on the notion of male gaze in these films. As was mentioned in section 3.2, no all-encompassing guidelines or strict frameworks were formulated for conducting the analysis; rather the analysis was carried out by scrutinizing each character as a whole while keeping in mind the few predetermined key issues, thus allowing for interesting observations emerge from the data.

The data for the study consisted of five relatively recent superhero action films: *The Dark Knight Rises, The Amazing Spider-Man, Iron Man 3, Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and their main female characters: Catwoman/Selina Kyle, Gwen Stacy, Pepper Potts, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, and Gamora, respectively. The films and their characters were analyzed in the order of their release years, from oldest (2012) to the most recent (2014), in order to better account for possible development in the style of representing the female characters over time.

Visual appearance and ethnicity

To answer research question 1a, the visual appearance of each character was analyzed according to body type, clothing, attractiveness and nudity. The ethnicity of the character was also noted. The analysis showed that all five characters conformed to a similar body type, which was thin with no considerable muscle, while still remaining curvaceous. Therefore, the films did not provide much in terms of diversity in female body types, but rather reinforced pre-existing female body 'ideals' in the media and in Hollywood cinema in general (see e.g. Grogan 2007).

In terms of clothing, the analysis showed slightly more variety. The characters wore clothing from combat outfits bearing resemblance to a dominatrix's outfit (specifically Catwoman, but also to some extent Black Widow when she wore her black combat unitard) to a casual jeans and a hoodie combination. Majority, however, were seen in clothes that hugged their body figures. The significance of the character's clothing is explained by whether the clothing is sexualizing and therefore objectifying the woman.

In most cases in my analysis, the clothing could not be considered particularly sexualizing, perhaps the most distinct exception being Catwoman's skin-tight leather outfit. Although it is not revealing in terms of nudity, the sexualizing occurs through the connotations that her outfit bears to that of a dominatrix, which again refers to sexual fetishism.

The films refrained from showcasing any extreme female nudity (i.e. completely naked, only wearing underwear), apart from *Iron Man 3*, which portrayed Pepper Potts in nothing but a sports bra and black pants for a portion of the film. Catwoman was also portrayed in black dresses that accentuated and partially exposed her legs and bosom. While Gwen Stacy was also shown wearing short skirts that exposed parts of her upper thighs, the pivotal difference between these three characters and their representations in relation to visual appearance was, in my opinion, that for example, Pepper's partial nudity evoked an admiring comment from Tony Stark, thus making it seem that the female body is for the man to look at and find pleasure in. The fact that Gwen's short skirts did not evoke comments from any of the other characters could be explained by her relatively young age (compared to the other characters in this study): as Hendricks (2013: 29) points out in relation to Hit-Girl, due to her status as a pre-teenager she is able to avoid hypersexualization. Catwoman's more revealing attire also received mainly implicit admiration from some of the male characters. The problem with this is that while it is all well and good for a woman to wear clothing that she is comfortable in – be it a short skirt or a hoodie –, encouraging women to wear revealing clothing only to appeal to men poses the problem.

Attractiveness of the characters was determined by explicit or implicit utterances by the other characters. There were more explicit utterances indicating the female character's attractiveness than initially expected. These utterances mostly involved commenting on how complimenting the woman's outfits were, or commenting in general that she looks great/nice/attractive. Having the male characters lust after them and wanting to flirt with them also implicitly indicated the attractiveness of the female characters.

Finally, in terms of the characters' ethnicities, apart from Gamora, all the female characters were Caucasian. Therefore other ethnicities were not represented equally in the films, which confirms the initial hypothesis concerning ethnic bias in Hollywood films. Even though Gamora represented a member of an alien race in the film, as was mentioned in 4.5, unless the viewer is familiar with the actress portraying her, it could be difficult to even know that she is portrayed by a non-Caucasian actress since the character's skin is painted green. Obviously it is possible to speculate whether the filmmakers specifically wanted an ethnic actress to play an alien character even if the significance goes unnoticed by some members of the audience, and what that choice is meant to convey. Or what it means that the only female character and her actress representing ethnic diversity in these films is painted green, while the main hero remains both male and white.

Speech

Research question 1b dealt with how the female characters were represented through their speech. The analysis made note of the character's speech in terms of, for example, tone, pitch, the amount of dialogue they had, and the topics that they discussed to the extent in which they were relevant. Therefore, not all of these aspects came up in every character's analysis. In addition, examining whether the films passed the Bechdel test was of particular interest, since the test gives indications as to whether the films are gender equal in terms of dialogue. In order to be considered gender equal, the film should have at least two named women who engage in a conversation with each other about a topic that does not involve a man. Overall, the female characters had less dialogue in the films than their male counterparts. A slight increase in the amount of dialogue could be detected in the two most recent films, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which is directly relative to the fact that the female characters in these two films also appeared to have more significant roles in the films.

There were a couple of interesting examples where the female character changed the pitch of their voice in situations where they also acted in a way that can be considered

more stereotypical of women. For example, Catwoman speaks in a higher pitch and quieter voice when she is pretending to be an innocent maid. As soon as she is caught in that lie, her voice becomes lower and stronger, even a bit husky. Likewise, when Natasha tells a sales assistant that she and her "fiancé" Steve are looking for honeymoon destinations, her pitch is considerably higher than her normal speaking voice throughout the film. It appears, therefore, that when these characters want to appear more feminine and "girly", they speak in a higher pitch.

None of the films fared well in the Bechdel test. Three characters (Catwoman, Gwen Stacy and Natasha/Black Widow) have extremely little or no interaction at all with another female character. Gamora has some interaction with another female character, her adopted sister Nebula, but their interactions are still too short to be counted as conversations. Only Pepper Potts's character has lengthier conversations with another female character, Maya Hansen. However, as mentioned in 4.3, it is debatable whether the third requirement of the Bechdel test is realized as their conversations stem from the actions of men. It is, therefore, evident that first of all, the gender distribution in these types of films is not equal if a female character can so easily go without interacting with another female character, and secondly, not enough female voices addressing societal matters concerning women are heard in these films.

Behavior

In analyzing the behavior of each character, the behavioral patterns by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995, see Figure 1) were employed. Analyzing the behavior of the characters was significant in trying to determine each character's versatility: the more variety in a given character's behavioral patterns, the more multifaceted the character's representation can be said to be. Analyzing the behavioral patterns proved to be valuable also in the sense that it opened up the analysis for further observations about the characters that would otherwise have gone largely unnoticed.

The analysis revealed that all the characters exhibited more variety in their behaviors than initially expected based on previous research; therefore none of the characters were defined by a single behavioral pattern. All the characters showed physical aggression to some extent: characters such as Gamora, Catwoman and Black Widow more so than Pepper Potts and Gwen Stacy. Since a majority of the implementation of said physical aggression took place in fighting scenes, it was expected that characters such as Gamora, Catwoman and Black Widow were also victims of physical aggression. Pepper Potts, however, represented a more stereotypical female character in the sense that she was a victim of physical aggression twice without initiating physical aggression herself. Although Pepper also shows physical aggression, the analysis showed that her act of physical aggression was clearly portrayed as an anomaly, making it clear that she was not fully in control of herself. She is also a victim of emotional abuse to some extent through Tony's jealous and self-absorbed behavior.

The most distinctive example of a victim of verbal aggression is Gamora. She is called a "whore", a "wench", and a "scum", and the inmates at the prison threaten her. Especially the explicit uses of extremely derogatory terms like "whore" stand out in the film's dialogue. Furthermore, such terms are used in a way that attempts to make them humorous; for example, when Drax calls Gamora a "green whore" he does it in conjunction with calling her a friend. Thus, the juxtaposition of the two terms 'whore' and 'friend' is supposed to make the scene humorous. Gamora, however, responds to the name-calling in a serious manner required by the situation, and quite aggressively tells Drax to stop referring to her with such derogatory terms, thus showing that a woman does not have to tolerate degrading treatment from men.

The characters also showed ingenuity in different ways, thus representing them as smart, resourceful, and capable. A few of the characters also demonstrated leadership in one way or another. Pepper, for example, was shown in a leadership position at Stark Industries. Natasha was also shown taking the leadership position a few times in the film, for example, when she tells Steve how they are going to escape the shopping mall

without getting caught by the agents who are after them. In addition, Gamora can be seen taking initiative and leadership when she betrays her father and Ronan, the villains of the film. She also appears to be the underlying leader of the group before Peter is established more clearly as the leader: she leads the group to meet the potential buyer on another planet and later ushers the group to save Xandar. All of the films, however, establish the male characters as the ultimate leaders and heroes, and compared to them the female characters have a long way to go until they can match their level of leadership.

One of the behavioral patterns that was of particular interest considering the stereotype of women as damsels in distress in superhero genre was the rescue pattern, in other words, did the female character require rescuing or did she perform any rescuing herself. Interestingly enough, only one of the characters could be seen as representing something resembling the stereotypical damsel in distress trope: Pepper. She is kidnapped by the villain, thus sending the male hero (Tony) on a rescue mission and making her a plot device to further the hero's story arc. Furthermore, as part of the damsel in distress stereotype, the hero then gets the girl and they live happily ever after, which is what happens at the end of *Iron Man 3*. When Peter rescues Gamora in the scene where she is left floating in space, the hero's act of rescuing is portrayed as a sacrifice on his part. While there is an element of the damsel in this scene as well, the film also breaks the stereotype by holding Peter's act of heroism to ridicule and not having the two characters engage in a grand romantic outburst of emotion afterwards.

The other characters were also rescued (apart from Gwen) in their respective films, but they were not portrayed as stereotypical damsels as such. For example, scenes where Steve rescues Natasha take place in hectic fight scenes and do not seem to undermine Natasha's abilities to take care of herself. Catwoman is also rescued in a fight scene, but in her case the film explicitly states that she needed to be rescued. Therefore Catwoman's abilities to take care of herself are explicitly undermined by Batman,

whereas Steve does not at any point assert himself as more capable, or more of a hero for saving Natasha in battle.

Catwoman is also rescued on a more profound level. The analysis showed that the film establishes Bruce Wayne/Batman as Catwoman's savior in the sense that he rescues her from her life of crime and hiding as an outlaw. The film portrays Bruce and a romantic relationship with him as the only answer to Catwoman's quest for a fresh start at normal life. This resulted in the film conveying very old-fashioned patriarchal ideology: in order for the woman to get a happy ending, she has to commit to a heterosexual relationship.

A majority of the female characters, however, perform acts of rescuing as well. Catwoman arrives just in time to rescue Batman from being crushed by Bane. Gwen saves Spider-Man from lizard-Connors, giving Spider-Man time to recuperate from his attack. Even Pepper proceeds to rescuing Tony from Killian. The means to perform the rescuing in both Catwoman's and Pepper's cases is, however, provided by men. Thus, these otherwise empowering scenes for the female characters are slightly undermined by still placing the quintessential power in male hands.

Function/role in the films' storylines
In determining the function, or role, of the characters in the films' storylines, Greimas's actantial model was applied to the observations made in analyzing the behavior of the characters. As described in 3.2, Greimas identified six actants: subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent (see Figure 2). The analysis showed that many of the characters could not be assigned only one actant for the duration of the films. For example, Catwoman alternated between mainly two actants: opponent and helper, which also reflected the character's complicated stance as neither a hero nor a villain. Gamora is also shown displaying more than one actant, but her case represents a more linear development from an opponent to a helper, and even a subject and a sender in

some respects (when considered that she instigates action in herself as well as the other characters).

Most of the characters could be considered representing the helper or object actants and very few could be seen as the subject actant, and even then the subject actant could be applied to only a few scenes. The lack of female characters as the subjects speaks for the gender inequality in superhero and action films in a larger scale as well. However, what is interesting is that a slight change in terms of the functions of the characters can be detected between the oldest films in this study and the most recent ones. Whereas, for example, Gwen Stacy is represented mainly as the object (with some degree of agency), characters such as Natasha and Gamora clearly have more agency and relevance to the films' storylines. They are portrayed more as equals to the male heroes in terms of their function in the film: they have integral roles in the films' storylines, for example, if it had not been for Gamora's betrayal and objective to save the planet Xandar in the first place, the group would not have been brought together, and in a sense, there would not have been a *Guardians of the Galaxy* film at all.

The actants together with the behavioral patterns helped determine whether the characters could be considered flat or round characters. This also relates to character development. As was mentioned above, characters such as Catwoman and Gamora go through different actants, which would suggest a level of character development as they change throughout the film and even surprise the viewer with their action. In addition, they exhibited various behavioral patterns, further constructing them as more rounded characters. In 4.4 it was also mentioned that Natasha could be seen going through some character development, as she seems to realize her own worth in keeping people safe. Pepper Potts and Gwen Stacy, however, represent more flat characters, as they do not seem to go through any major character development. Although Pepper becomes extremely strong and capable at the end of the film, it cannot be considered character development per se, since it is only the effect of the Extremis-formula and does not stem from any inner growth of the character. Similarly with Gwen, any

changes that her character goes through (e.g. break-up with Peter) come from outside the character itself and thus are not the result of the character itself developing but rather the surroundings of the character changing.

Finally, in terms of the "male gaze", a majority of the films utilized camera angles that could be seen reflecting the notion of a male gaze. In other words, the camera angles accentuated the female body, thus objectifying her. These kinds of images are problematic in female representation, as they objectify women and emphasize their body over their action. Furthermore, the camera angles in, for example, Image 2 and Image 35 are blatantly obvious in their function: they do not advance the narration of the film and therefore it is clear that their function is only to showcase the female body.

All in all the analysis showed that in terms of visual appearance the films represent women as conforming to a very biased mold. There is also a large gap in ethnic diversity in the films, both in general and regarding the female characters. In terms of speech, not enough female voices are present as none of the films fully passed the Bechdel test. Regarding the characters' behaviors, the analysis showed more diversity, and slight improvements in the activeness of the characters the more recent the film was. The analysis showed that the characters were more multifaceted than perhaps initially thought, and they did contain many positive representations as well. Nonetheless, there is room for more improvement in representing the female characters as autonomous, capable and active. It appears, however, that even in the couple of years between the films in this study, some positive development has taken place in the way that the female characters are represented, and what kind of roles they play in the films' storylines. As more films in this genre are being made every year, such development encourages improvement in the future as well.

5.2 Findings in relation to previous research

In chapter 2.5 I discussed a few relatively recent studies conducted on both superhero films and action films. Bogarosh (2013) focused on the (patriarchal) ideologies that films convey as regards women and their place and value in society. Stoltzfus's (2014) study looked at the female characters in superhero films from the point of view of feminist political economy, in an attempt to explain the decision-making process in the production companies who make the films and the conglomerates that own the production companies. Hendricks (2013) analyzed three female characters that she termed "Super Sidechicks", and argued that they addressed the prevailing problems within the postfeminist world in which women are seemingly equal to men. In addition, Gilpatric's (2010) study, where she investigated violent female action characters, was discussed. Here I will discuss the findings of the present study in relation to these previous ones.

Both Stoltzfus's and Bogarosh's studies touched upon some of the same characters as the present study. For example, both discussed Natasha's character in *The Avengers*. Bogarosh (2013: 118) labeled Natasha's character as a damsel in distress based on a scene in *The Avengers*, where the Norse god Thor essentially rescues her from the rampaging Hulk. Bogarosh describes: "She then cowers in a corner while the fighting proceeds around her, despite the fact that she has been trained to fight. It is only when it is someone she cares about, Hawkeye, needs help that she is able to mobilize herself." Bogarosh argues that this scene demonstrates yet another capable woman rendered helpless to defend herself. I find Bogarosh's argument problematic, as it seems to suggest that simply because Natasha shows emotion – fear and shock to be exact, after coming face to face with the Hulk who is a force difficult to stop even for Thor – she is automatically a helpless damsel in need of saving. I argue that this only makes her human and more relatable to viewers, since she demonstrates real emotion but also capability to overcome those paralyzing emotions – after all, she goes on to rescue Hawkeye. Furthermore, the present study showed that in *CA: TWS* Natasha is

represented as a rather balanced character in this respect, also adding new dimensions to her character that were not seen in *The Avengers*. She is a hardcore professional, but she is also a human being in midst of superheroes, Gods, and extraterrestrials. She is portrayed with many nuances, such as being humorous, vulnerable, serious, and caring.

Stoltzfus (2014: 2) also criticized Natasha's introduction in *The Avengers*, which I agree is vastly different from the other characters (all male). Natasha is first seen strapped in a chair in a skin-tight dress, surrounded by three men. At first, it seems it is not going well for her, but it is soon revealed that she is exactly where she wanted to be and it is all according to her plan – although the thugs do not know it. The audience can assume she has used her femininity and sexuality to get into that position so that she can obtain information from the men. She is shown making a quick escape while grabbing her high heels in her hand when walking out. Stoltzfus (ibid.) admits the scene shows Natasha as a "force to be reckoned with", but also says that at the same time the scene reinforces common ideologies and stereotypes that "female heroes must rely on their sexuality to fight crime, because men can be swayed by the power of femme fatales". Men are not depicted in this way: as Stoltzfus puts it, "their sexuality is not part of their resume". While I agree in her statement that none of the male heroes are shown to use their sexuality in a similar way even in the present study, an alternative reading of the scene could, however, be that the film deliberately takes advantage of the damsel-in-distress stereotype and turns it upside down: Natasha is not and has not been at any stage prior to the events in the scene a damsel in distress, and instead she has been the one in control, orchestrating the events, and simply taking advantage of the men's self-entitled sense of power. For Catwoman her sexuality and femininity are also portrayed as assets, making her a 'femme fatale', but on the other hand she can be seen taking advantage of what appears to be the weakness of men rather than a fault in the woman.

Stoltzfus (2014: 3) also argued that "female characters are relegated to the background as maternal figures or sexually tempting vixens". The present study, however, did not find any of the characters fitting comfortably into either category, and rather

demonstrated similarities with Hendricks's (2013) analysis of, for example, Hit-Girl, in terms of having more agency and defying certain gender stereotypes (e.g. demonstrating violence and, in fact, being good at/finding enjoyment in it). The female characters were more complex than what Stoltzfus argued, portraying a variety of nuances. Apart from Catwoman, who does seduce men to her own advantage, none of the female characters in the present study used their sexuality to their advantage in as blatant manner as Stoltzfus suggests female characters are forced to do. However, Catwoman also represents the "happily ever after" theme that Bogarosh (2013: 20-36) discusses, as she is portrayed in a heterosexual romantic relationship and a "happily ever after" scene at the end of the film.

Both Bogarosh and Stoltzfus identified the damsel in distress stereotype in their studies. Stoltzfus (2014: 82) writes: "Women are presented as expendable, people who can be held captive, tortured, and killed without serious repercussion". In the present study, however, only the character of Pepper Potts is represented in this way. Stoltzfus also mentions Pepper's portrayal, but she mainly focuses on the character of Mary Jane in the *Spider-Man* films. Bogarosh likewise discusses the damsel in distress stereotype in relation to the character of Pepper Potts in the first *Iron Man* and Mary Jane. As was discussed in 4.2, Gwen Stacy represents an improvement in this respect compared to her predecessor: she is not portrayed as a damsel in distress like Mary Jane was. Since the films in which, for example, Mary Jane appears are older the findings of the current study seem to suggest that there has been a change in the way the female characters are represented in regard to the damsel in distress stereotype in more recent films. They are not necessarily portrayed as damsels in need of saving in the same capacity anymore, and instead they are given opportunities to save themselves and others (see also Hendricks 2013).

Stoltzfus also argues that the absence of the female characters in majority of the films she studied (among them two of the same films in the present study, *Iron Man 3* and *The Dark Knight Rises*) would not alter the plots of the films considerably, therefore arguing

that the female characters do not play important roles in the storylines. Whereas, for example, in *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Dark Knight Rises* this would sadly be the case (without Gwen and Catwoman the films would work more or less the same, although Spider-Man would have had to find someone else to make the antidote and Batman would have had to defeat Bane by himself), in *Guardians of the Galaxy* the plot would quite drastically change if Gamora's character did not exist. Similarly, although not necessarily changing the overall plot of the film, the absence of Natasha in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* would affect the overall mood of the film if Steve were to go on the run and discover the truth about Hydra all by himself.

The present study also noticed that the camera angles in the films at times focused on the female character's body parts, thus diminishing the importance of the woman's personality and intelligence (Bogarosh 2013: 52-54). This can also be seen conforming to Stoltzfus's (2014) overall argument in her study that since the companies making these films are run largely by men, the finished products inevitably convey content conforming to patriarchal ideology. Gilpatric (2010) and Bogarosh (2013) both also note in their respective studies the unequal ethnic representation in the films, and the present study can comply with this notion, as there was only one female character representing ethnicity other than Caucasian.

While the present study made some similar observations with the previous studies with regard to the representations, the present study also provides alternative interpretations of some of the characters and aspects of their representations. For example, while many of the female characters in the present study can be described representing the helper actant, and therefore can be considered sidekicks by both Bogarosh's and Gilpatric's definition, their categorization proves to be more complex due to their varying other qualities and characteristics than the previous studies seem to suggest. Thus, the present study challenges some of the interpretations of previous research, suggesting new ones by uncovering the complexities of the characters.

5.3 Implications and suggestions for future research

The findings of the present study can provide fresh insights into analyzing the representations of female characters in superhero films, and also provide new ways of conducting such analysis for the academic community interested in exploring film representations. For example, the present study used the actantial model, which has previously been used mainly in the study of fairy tales and not in action films, proving that the model can be successfully applied to other genres as well. The present study can also prove valuable for people working in the field of filmmaking: for example, screenwriters, directors, and producers could benefit from this and other similar research done on representation of female characters because they could get a better understanding of the problems and advantages of the current representations from the perspective of critical (feminist) viewers and work on developing the representations further.

The present study addresses issues that are currently widely discussed especially in different online media in relation to superhero films and female characters. Therefore the present study can provide in-depth insight into the representation of the characters for the broader community of people interested in films of this genre. The viewers of the films could benefit from the present study by gaining awareness of the ways in which the female characters are represented, as well as the problems and advantages of those representations. This could also help the viewers examine the representation of female characters more critically. By educating audiences about the problems and advantages of female representation in film (and in media), gradual change can be achieved by prompting audiences to, for example, give feedback to the film companies on what sorts of female characters they want to see, thus hopefully resulting in better representations in the future.

The field of gender representation in superhero films, or in action films in general, provides fruitful ground for many types of future research. Films that are based on

comic books or other pre-existing source material provide data for comparative research: it would be interesting to see whether representation of female characters change in the comic book-to-film adaptation process, and if they do then how exactly do they change. This could also provide insight into how different eras affect the way the representations are constructed, as often the source material might be even decades older.

Since character development is often more difficult to achieve in film due to the restricted length of the film format, studying character development in a television series might provide fruitful ground for an analysis. For example, there are quite a few relatively new television series involving comic book characters and female characters as well, for example, *Arrow, The Flash, Jessica Jones* and *Agent Carter*, that one could use as data (especially the two last-mentioned series as they feature female protagonists).

In a few years' time it would be possible to conduct a longitudinal study on the female representations in superhero films expanding over ten years or so. This would give a valuable look into the development of the representations and also how they might reflect the prevailing ideologies and attitudes. Another possible point of view is to look at the representations of masculinity in the superhero film genre. As new superhero films are being made, there is new data available even for a similar study to the present one, and since this type of study is subjective in nature, there are always new insights and observations to be made regarding female representation.

5.4 Limitations of study

Due to the scope of a Master's thesis, some limitations to the present study occurred. For example, the original plan to analyze all named female characters in the five films had to be discarded due to it resulting in an excessive amount of data to be analyzed in detail. While representing a variety of different types of characters, the five characters

that were analyzed nevertheless exemplify only a handful of potential characters that one could analyze within the superhero action genre. Therefore, an analysis of completely different characters might result in vastly different findings. In addition, with only five characters as the data sample, it is difficult to make broad generalizations based on the findings.

The lack of an all-encompassing framework for the analysis of female characters was both an advantage and a limitation. It was advantageous in the sense that conducting the analysis was not restricted to only certain attributes or issues, and it allowed for constant revising of the direction of the analysis. In other words, it was possible to add observations that had not been initially anticipated in the analysis. However, without an explicit framework to follow, some aspects of the female representations may have gone unnoticed. It also might have made the analysis process more systematic and easier to organize.

Despite these limitations I was able to conduct detailed and in-depth analysis of the characters by combining different models and frameworks that, to my knowledge, have not been utilized together in a similar study before, thus possibly providing some new techniques into conducting similar research in the future.

5.5 Closing thoughts and looking ahead

As was mentioned already in the introduction to this study, the superhero genre in films is constantly increasing its popularity with new comic book superheroes finding their way onto the big screen every year. Since the comic books have been around for decades, the film studios have almost unlimited amount of characters and events that they can transfer onto film. Among them also boundary-breaking characters that have the potential to challenge not only the superhero genre but also the way both men and women are represented in action films.

For example, few months prior to writing this, Marvel Studios released *Deadpool* (2016), a film that features a real anti-hero as the main character, who not only breaks the fourth wall (i.e. the character addresses the audience viewing the film and also addresses the fact that he is a character in a superhero film) but also begins to break the heteronormativity of the genre through references to the main hero's bisexuality as well as by poking holes in gender stereotypes. The film is revolutionary also in the sense that it is the first R-rated (in United States) Marvel superhero film. Moreover, what is interesting about the film is that, according to the makers of the film, it would not have been made without the overwhelming demand by the fans[19]. *Deadpool* proves the increasing power that the audiences (with the help of social media) hold in their hands, therefore giving hope to those who wish to see, for example, Black Widow in her own film: maybe one day with enough pressure from the fans it could happen as well.

Marvel Studios has also quite recently released two television series in collaboration with the online video streaming service provider Netflix. The two series, *Agent Carter* and *Jessica Jones*, both feature a female lead character and both have received a great deal of praise from viewers and critics alike. *Jessica Jones*, for example, has been praised for its realistic and strong female representations[20]. It will also be interesting to see how the representations of female characters change in the not-so-distant future with upcoming films featuring a female lead, such as *Wonder Woman* (due to be released by DC Entertainment in 2017) and *Captain Marvel* (due to be released by Marvel Studios in 2019). The success of the above mentioned television series has at least shown that there is a demand for more female led titles within the superhero genre and that creating fully realized female characters is not an impossible task, therefore causing carefully optimistic expectations for the films as well.

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[19] See e..g. Acuna (2015). Ryan Reynolds says the 'Deadpool' movie is happening because of the fans. http://uk.businessinsider.com/ryan-reynolds-says-fans-made-deadpool-movie-happen-2015-7?r=US&IR=T. (Accessed 16 March 2016).

[20] See e..g. Booth, M. (2015). No, *Jessica Jones* is not sexist towards men; let's talk about why. http://www.themarysue.com/jessica-jones-gender-equality/. (Accessed 11 March 2016).

With the future looking bright and plentiful for the superhero film genre, it is also important to keep the academic community up to date on the developments in gender representations within the genre. In my opinion, there is plenty of room to expand the research field on this topic in future years, as new data will keep being made. The present study has begun to account for some of the already existing positive representations of the female characters, and hopefully future research will make an effort to add to that with the representations of upcoming films.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1.   Appendix 2.

Appendix 3.
Appendix 4.

Appendix 5.