Holding Out for a Hero: Understanding American Militarism from Post-9/11 Hollywood's Superhero Films

Justina Buskaite[1]

[1]University of Amsterdam, justebus@gmail.com

Abstract

Increased focus on American security and militarism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States is not only reflected in the country's foreign and domestic policy approaches, but also in its popular culture works. By exploring and analyzing a popular Marvel superhero franchise Captain America, the paper aims to understand the connection between the works of popular culture and the influences of American militarism. The paper operationalizes concepts of security by David Campbell (1998) and American militarism by Lori Ann Crowe (2018), explores all three films in the Captain America franchise through identity formation, state loyalty, costumes, superpowers and draws parallels between the manifestations of American militarism in real-life practices. In doing so, the paper argues that the influences of American militarism are not only prominent in the Captain America franchise, but they also enrich the understanding of American militarist practices themselves as well as identity construction.

Keywords: American Militarism; Captain America; Popular Culture; 9/11; Security and Popular Culture; Militarism

Helplessness demonstrated through the increased focus on security and growing militarist sentiments after the 2001 September 11 attacks in New York City have not only been present in foreign American politics (such as The War on Terror) but also in domestic American politics. After 9/11, public confidence in the American military rose significantly, as 75 percent of the public expressed a 'great deal' of trust in the military (Fallows 2015). Veteran's Day, military training programs in American high schools and almost 650 billion dollars allocated for the American military in 2018 (World Bank 2018) indicate the importance of militarist culture in the United States. Thus, militarism is also reflected in popular culture. Fictional characters, such as Captain America or Iron Man, which quite explicitly are representations of American culture and values, help us to better understand the underlying values of the current American military culture and the importance of heroism. However, as the popular culture analysis field

is left for the field of humanities, the content of popular culture works is not taken seriously in the social sciences. If we were to closely analyze the underlying values or narrative in the mass-consumed media, we would be able to better understand how politics shape popular culture and how popular culture shapes politics in return. Therefore, it is crucially important to interpret popular culture works in the field of International Relations, since what is considered to be heroic is largely reflective of the culture's underlying attitudes (Crowe 2018: 71).

In this paper, I raise the question of how American militarist culture is reflected in contemporary Hollywood's superhero films. I argue that the social and political post-9/11 context has allowed us to situate superheroes into a familiar social environment which is reflective of American militarist culture. The paper aims to answer the research question by conducting a visual interpretation and a narrative deconstruction through the conceptualization of militarism and security of contemporary Hollywood's superhero film franchise Captain America.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Firstly, I conduct a literature review on existing studies at the intersection of International Relations, American militarism and superhero films. I divide the literature review into discussions on the political nature of superhero identities and the connection between popular culture works and political values. Secondly, I lay out the framework and operationalization of the theories for this paper. The main findings from the analysis will be gathered and discussed in the conclusion, followed by a discussion of some of the limitations of the research.

Literature review

The political nature of superhero identities

The existing academic discourse focusing on the analysis of popular culture and International Relations aims to emphasize the inherently political nature of the superhero characters. Costello and Worcester (2014) highlight the political role of superheroes in fictional narratives. The authors argue that superheroes interact with politicians or governmental organizations, participate in wars or get involved in public controversies (Costello and Worcester 2014: 85). However, such classifications are not sufficient to deem fictional characters as inherently political, since the proposed argument provides very broad assumptions of the ever-changing political landscape and its representation(s). Such argumentative assumptions would imply that the portrayed superheroes can be placed on the political spectrum or express their political preferences in some other form. However, Phillips (2013) argues that the moral arc of superheroes is ambiguous so it can include broad ideals reflective of both right and left-wing identities. He further argues that the moral vagueness of the characters allows the viewers to combine their own world view with the protagonist's, making it possible for various audiences to connect to the superheroes. This argument is supported by Dittmer (2005), who argues that Captain America embodies American nationalism, foreign policy and national order (Dittmer 2005: 627). Nationalism, representation of foreign policy and internal order are also understood as rather vague ideas that are represented through actions, dialogues and costumes of the character.

The contextualization of superheroes in the political landscape

Many researchers focusing on more traditional ways of approaching International Relations would argue that the analysis of popular culture works is insignificant or even too far-reaching as a research method. Here it is important to realize why images (or in this case, films) can be an important medium in constructing narratives about the political and cultural landscape of a state. Hansen (2018) argues that images are important ways of conveying messages of securitization as they are able to evoke emotions and find a personal level of connection with

the audience. She also stresses the ability of visual media to turn abstract ideas, such as security or patriotism, into more concrete and specific symbols (Hansen 2018: 276). Such notions are also shared by the creators of the superhero comics and films. One of the editors of Captain America, Mark Gunwald, states that 'juxtaposition of fantasy and real-life experience allows such themes to emerge' (Dubose 2007). Therefore, Dubose (2007) argues that in order for superheroes to be relevant and impactful, they have to resemble the symbols of the current times.

Theoretical framework and operationalization

In order to structurally link and relate the analysis closer to theoretical International Relations approaches, I use the theoretical framework and concepts of identity and security as conceptualized by Campbell (1998). In his influential book Writing Security, Campbell proposes a poststructuralist framework of interpreting danger and security formation processes. He argues that danger is not an objective condition, but rather depends on our social and cultural construction of threats and security (Campbell 1998: 2). Campbell also argues that identity construction is achieved through a regulated, repetitive processes and that state definitions of threat play a role in this (Campbell 1998: pp. 10-13). Therefore, he relates back to the core aim of this paper – if we are able to interpret the portrayals of danger and security in the popular culture works, we will be able to better comprehend the underlying American militarist identities.

In this paper, I employ an interpretivist research method by analyzing the visual representations and narrative constructions in the superhero film Captain America. I focus on Captain America since this superhero is the only character in the Marvel universe whose name includes a non-fictional country. Although similar analysis could be done with other comic characters of the Marvel universe, the research assumes that the character of Captain America can be analyzed as a metonymy for the United States. The analysis will include all three films of the Captain America story: Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) directed by Joe Johnston, Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) and Captain America: Civil War (2016) by Joe and Anthony Russo. I conduct the narrative and visual interpretation by connecting the film to the concept of militarism proposed by Crowe (2018). This definition of militarism constitutes three indicators of identity formation: state loyalty, costume, and superpowers (or weapons) (Crowe 2018: 110). Although additional indicators constitute the notion of militarism, the three factors chosen above help to engage with, and analyze militarism, with regards to the visual medium. Identity formation, state loyalty and costume allow us to interpret both the vocal and the visual representation of the characters on screen. Therefore, I will argue that the three militarist indicators help to generalize the depiction of the American militarist culture and thus aid our understanding about the underlying cultural and political notions of the post-9/11 era in the United States.

The films were studied by conducting a discourse analysis. The elements that were evaluated include the narrative (or the plot of the films), the dialogue of the characters and the visual representation of the character's costume or the surrounding environment. The plot narratives and the visual representation of Captain America will be further analyzed through the lens of the militarist conceptualizations.

It is also important to note that my analysis of the Captain America franchise should not be understood as a definitive interpretation of the film. The main aim of this research is to analyze the existing norms of political culture in popular culture works and understand how the post-9/11 American political and social changes have impacted the portrayal of militarism in popular culture.

Depictions of American militarism in the Captain America franchise

Identity formation

Identity formation is crucial both in superhero culture and in real-life security construction. As the framing of security issues is created through the establishment of rather vague normative ideas (such as liberty, freedom, us versus them juxtapositions), such ideals are seen as unquestionable or often referred to as 'non-partisan' (Crowe 2018: 101). But how are such values and understandings of security constructed both in popular culture and in American politics? In this section, I aim to explore prevalent American militarist notions which are essentially reflected in superhero films due to their 'unquestionable' nature in the American political and social culture.

In the Captain America films, the main protagonist Steve Rogers is framed to be a moral soldier from the old-times. As the character originated during the Second World War, the identity of Steve Rogers is closely connected to an 'us versus them' juxtaposition. Ideals such as honor, bravery and sacrifice are repeatedly introduced and highlighted throughout all three Captain America films: the protagonist is referred to as 'not a good soldier, but a good man' (Captain America: The First Avenger 2011). One of the main narrative arcs throughout the first film tries to establish Steve Roger's determination to become a soldier: he is shown to be lying about his birthplace in order to be accepted into the American military despite five earlier rejections. Additionally, the ideals of Captain America are constructed through the repeated pattern of the 'good versus bad' dichotomy. 'I don't like bullies. I don't care where they're from' (Captain America: The First Avenger 2011) is Steve Roger's motivation for joining the American military during the Second World War. Referring to the enemy side as 'the bully' not only reinforces the dichotomy but also implies that the hero is working in a defensive manner and aims to preserve security (Dittmer 2007). Lastly, Captain America also highlights the importance of teamwork and comradeship of the soldiers, signaling the effectiveness of the collective approach to security issues since 'Soldiers trust each other, that's what makes it an army. Not a bunch of guys running around and shooting guns' (Captain America: The Winter Soldier 2014).

Similarly, the American Army also highlights parallel values as the core military principles of the American soldiers, called the Seven Core Army Values (US Army 2020). The Seven Core Army Values focus on the importance of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage (US Army 2020). The core army ideals closely mirror the identity formation aspects covered in the Captain America franchise films. Such systems of rather vague ideals stressing the importance of honor, courage and duty, are not only seen as universally moral due to their malleable nature, but also reflective of the underlying militarist understandings. Thus, the repeated emphasis of non-fictional military values allows us to extrapolate that Captain America can be seen as an idealized American soldier, embodying all of the necessary American Army values.

State loyalty

As it was established in the section on the identity formation of the superhero, inherent non-partisan ideals of bravery, honor and liberty create a framework on how to deal with security issues both domestically and internationally. The key focus of this section is to analyze American militarism in the Captain America film franchise by exploring depictions of the corporate identity of the idealized fictional soldier and comparing them to the 2001 Patriot Act. In this section, I argue that the repetition of corporate loyalty creates insecurity which allows the American security approach to seek expansive state power. This argument builds on the

works by Crowe (2018) and Campbell (1998) by seeking to explore how popular culture works normalize corporate loyalty and invasive security approaches.

The story of the whole Captain America film franchise is constructed in a way that allows us to analyze state loyalty in comparison to both fictional and existing global organizations. When asked about the motivation for the mission, the main protagonist swiftly gives away that the mission 'is not about him' (Captain America: The First Avenger 2011) which implies and builds the background for the further construction of unquestionable loyalty to the American state and military. If the first film in the franchise established the corporate loyalty of the character, the second film Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) introduced the notion of state insecurity. The main protagonist is introduced to the idea of pre-emptive strikes, which seek to 'neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen' (Captain America: The Winter Soldier 2014). Such choice of action is justified by mentioning the 9/11 attacks in New York City, which created the urgency for the pre-emptive strike programs. Lastly, the narrative in the final film in the franchise, Captain America: The Civil War (2016) depicts a conflict between Captain America and the United Nations, who want to supervise the actions of the Avengers. During this conflict, Captain America emphasizes the need for individual responsibility and the right to choose their own actions as the dialogue states that 'we're not taking responsibility for our actions. This document just shifts the blames...safest hands are still our own' (Captain America: The Civil War 2016). Thus, the character clearly emphasizes the importance of individual international responsibility and the absolute national sovereignty of the United States, as opposed to shared responsibility among other countries in multilateral institutions.

Comparably, we can see similar patterns of emphasized corporate loyalty expressed indirectly in the 2011 USA Patriot Act which sought to combat domestic terrorism and prevent possible terrorist attacks in the United States (Bush 2001). The act gave permission to the Federal Bureau of Investigations to gain access to e-mails, telephone data, and financial statements of citizens without a court order and authorized the detention of immigrants and home searches without a warrant (US Congress 2001). Such action(s) by the US government can be seen as intruding into the private lives of American citizens. However, President George W. Bush legitimized the act by framing the urgency of combating terrorism in the United States. When delivering a speech before signing the Patriot Act, Bush repeated phrases such as ['a threat like no other…they (terrorists) recognize no barrier of morality'] and 'in the hands of the evil ones' (Bush 2001) hence constantly constructing through repetition the dangerous, immoral and foreign identity of the enemy. The parallel ideas introduced in the Captain America franchise and the USA Patriot Act therefore help us to understand why the depiction of such securitization issues are seen as justifiable and normal. Constant reiteration of the incoming threats and attacks to which the state (or the hero) must always be ready to respond to and prevent, without being able to trust or rely on help from others, creates a perpetual state of danger and hostility during which the citizens have to agree with the justification of the expansion of the state apparatus (Crowe 2018: 89).

Costume and superpowers

The following section aims to analyze how visual representations of costumes and action scenes in the Captain America franchise films depict American militarist tendencies. My argument here is two-fold: firstly, I argue that the costume of the superhero informs us about the character's ideals and identity. Secondly, I argue that instead of analyzing the superpowers attributed to the comic book characters, we should analyze the ways through which the superheroes use their powers and how such scenes are depicted. Analysis of the depicted visuals rather than the attribution of the supernatural abilities allows us to examine how war or security conflicts are portrayed in popular culture.

Firstly, Captain America's costume in the 2011-2016 film franchise is only slightly altered from the original comic book version of his costume. The modernized version of the hero's apparel still features the shield with the national colors of the United States (red, blue and white). However, the suit became less vibrant. According to the costume designer for the Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) and Captain America: The Civil War (2016) Judianna Makovsky, the directors of the films asked for a more 'realistic look' (Makovsky 2014) for the costumes and based the new costumes on actual military and police uniforms. Therefore, the costumes in the film franchise are not only conveying the message of nationalism through the placement of the American colors, but they are still reflective of the ideals of the current military systems (Karaminas 2006: pp. 7-9).

Secondly, I analyze the superpowers depicted and introduced by the Captain America film franchise. In the comic books, Steve Rogers is injected with the 'super soldier serum' (Captain America: The First Avenger 2011) which enhances the physical capabilities of a person. The portrayed change into a strong and idealized soldier is presented as a state-of-the-art military achievement that contrasts with a more traditional way of military training through discipline and time (Crowe 2018: 168). Another inherent trope of any superhero film are the countless fast paced action scenes, through which the redemption arcs are usually completed, and the viewers are taken through a cathartic journey with our moral heroes. Here, the militarist understandings can also be pointed out: Neibaur (1995) argues that inherent masculinity in such stories portrays violence as the only resort of conflict resolution. Repeated depictions of action scenes of the superheroes who pose as ideal soldiers and civilians at the same time blur the lines between the soldiers and the civilians in a similar way that President Bush referred to the American citizens after the 9/11 attacks as 'every American is a soldier now' (Crowe 2018: 173). Furthermore, action scenes often come across as cartoonish, relying on the supernatural qualities of the superheroes and not showing any gruesome aftermaths, thus creating 'derealized war' (Crowe 2018: 103). The idea of the 'derealization of war' comes from the works of Slavoj Zizek, who states that such a practice was popularized after 9/11 since it helped to construct a juxtaposition between the 'clean' domestic reporting and gruesome visuals from the war zones (Crowe 2018). Hence, the visual depictions of superhero films tend to reflect the American understanding of security, which was heavily influenced by the securitization practices after 9/11.

Therefore, when exploring the reflections of American militarism in contemporary Hollywood's superhero films, we can observe similar patterns of conflict and security construction in fiction and in real-life American political examples. Captain America reiterates the same values as the US Army, represents the conflict between multilateral organizations and the sovereign state, while portraying violence as the sole peace-making solution.

Conclusion

The paper explored the depictions of the American militarism in the post-9/11 era in Hollywood's superhero films and argued that by exploring the works of the popular culture we are not only able to find similar patterns between the real-life and fictionalized military practices, but also explore how the militarized narratives are constructed and normalized. By applying and operationalizing the concept of American militarism by Lori Ann Crowe (2018) to the 2011-2016 Marvel film franchise Captain America, the paper explored the understandings and depictions of identity formation, state loyalty, costume superpowers, and drew parallels to the real-life manifestations of the American militarism. I argued that the construction and repetition of militarization practices in popular culture works allow for a normalization of American militarist practices through identity formation and costume. This reiterates the 'unquestionable' American values of state loyalty during security conflicts as well as depicting violence and war through a parallel manner to post-9/11 visual reporting.

I acknowledge the theoretical limitations of the paper, which is partly due to the limited importance attached to the analysis of popular culture in the field of international relations. In addition to that, due to a post-structuralist nature of the paper, the readings and interpretations of the Captain America films should not be taken as definite meanings behind the text, rather, the films were taken as an illustrative example to explore possible American militarist understandings in popular culture.

Finally, the research poses as a ground for future studies, exploring the connection between international relations and popular culture. Due to the fact that the paper explored portrayals of American militarism in the Captain America franchise, it mostly focused on the male portrayals of violence and left out the analysis of female superhero characters. Introduction of a female superhero character analysis would be a promising venue for future exploration, since it would incorporate post-structuralist feminist frameworks into the research. Further analysis of popular culture works and politics could also include a comparative analysis between superhero representations in the past, while raising the question whether historic popular culture works help us to understand international conflicts.

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