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In the Aftermath of Catastrophe

The Case for Relational Agency in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016)

Superheroes are marked by an increased level of agency: they have physical abilities that even gifted audience members are not capable of, and their superhero identity allows them – to a certain degree – to act on their abilities. According to structuration theory, agency refers “not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place. [...] [T]he individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently” (Giddens 9). The abilities that differentiate superheroes from the general population in the diegetic world enable a different set of situations in which these characters need to decide how to act. Repeated practices produce and reproduce structures that guide future decisions (cf. Giddens 19), but superheroes frequently face situations without established patterns of behaviour.

The *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU) lends itself to representing how such patterns are developed: as it adapts the publisher’s comic book sales strategy to both the big screen and television (Johnson 5-6), the MCU is a system of interconnected franchises continuously set in the same diegetic world. Individual characters are repeatedly brought into contact with each other through the Avengers, i.e. an independent group of superheroes that goes beyond Iron Man and Captain America (Cap). This is depicted in events such as *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The latter in particular proves the most fruitful in discussing the consequences of increased agency and its regulation: it depicts how both superheroes and the governments of the world react to the Ultron catastrophe,¹ in which an artificial intelligence built by Iron Man destroyed the fictional city of Sokovia in Eastern Europe.²

This theme is by no means a new invention. In fact, *CA: Civil War* builds upon a rich tradition of comparable comic-book narratives. The 1980s in particular brought about influential stories that overtly negotiate the political status of superheroes (cf. Carney 100-101; Coogan 214-216). Such narratives conventionally combine

superhero-made disaster with both infighting among this social group and means to provide accountability for their actions. Examples include the motto ‘who watches the watchmen’ in the graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986–1987) and the continuous press scrutiny in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986).³ The film’s hypotext, the comic-book event *Civil War* (2006–2007), climaxes in Cap realising the necessity of the Superhero Registration Act when he notices the damage his actions cause (Millar/McNiven ch. 7: [21-22]).⁴ The adaptation, however, does not condone the regulation of ‘enhanced individuals’ through media or government oversight:⁵ Cap ultimately embraces his vigilante status.

As this paper argues, the film makes a case for relational agency instead. A close reading shows that this is achieved in three steps: firstly, the film compares the Avengers to a terrorist cell, for example, by shifting from Cold War locations to those linked to global terrorism, and by avoiding physically powerful villains. In a second step, the film offers individual accountability as a first potential solution to heightened agency. This is quickly deconstructed, however, as a hegemonic discourse employed by the government to restrict deviant behaviour. Thirdly, the film develops an alternative way of legitimising agency by turning Cap into a gravitational centre of mutual support among some enhanced beings.

Relational agency refers to both providing support for others and seeking support from them in order to empower deliberative action (cf. Edwards/Mackenzie 301). The concept seeks to describe a mode of agency alternative to individual, autonomous action. As such it emphasises the negotiation between a number of actors familiar with each other and working towards a common goal. While this specific notion originates in Educational Studies, it represents an organisational structure that can be described in terms of network theory. The film emphasises ties between an open number of actors (nodes) in order to contrast two competing organisational modes: while relational agency equals a network, individual accountability represents

hierarchy. The tension between the two can be contextualised as an ongoing symptom of present-day capitalism marked by competition between socially produced resources – including non-material ones, such as support – on the one hand and institutions struggling to maintain their power on the other (cf. Mason 144; Powell 303; Castells 176).⁶ Real-life examples of this tension include start-ups and corporations or resistance movements and governments, to name a few. As Hardt and Negri point out, however, terrorist networks (as opposed to terrorist cells) are, in fact, vertical power structures rather than horizontal ones (88-89).

Due to the scale of ongoing vast narratives, research on Marvel is usually limited to individual story lines such as *Civil War*. Despite the comic-book event's recent publication, a number of existing analyses focus on its allegorisation of the broader 9/11 discourse including the Patriot Act as well as subsequent calls for political accountability (cf. Packard 45). Cap as a character is mostly represented in research as a site to negotiate national identity. The *MCU* is critically considered mostly in terms of a commercial strategy.

The *exposition* of *CA: Civil War* re-introduces the previous film's villains Crossbones and the programmable assassin Winter Soldier and echoes the Ultron catastrophe. Scarlet Witch is blamed for failing to contain the explosion caused by Crossbones' suicide in a public square in Lagos. As a result, US Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross introduces the Sokovia Accords to the Avengers, a plan to confine their actions to missions sanctioned by a UN panel. The *second and third acts* escalate a conflict over this plan: while Iron Man supports oversight out of guilt, Cap opposes the Accords on the grounds of being tied to agendas he has no hand in. The signing ceremony in Vienna is allegedly bombed by Winter Soldier, driving Cap and Black Panther to find him. As all three are arrested in Berlin, the film's primary villain Zemo programmes Winter Soldier to escape. Re-gaining consciousness, Winter Soldier tells Cap and Falcon that Zemo may be after five additional super soldiers hidden in Siberia. The *first climax* sets up two loose alignments: Scarlet Witch escapes her confinement, and Iron Man recruits Spider-Man. As those who did not sign the Accords try to escape through the Leipzig-Halle Airport, they are being confronted by those who were ordered by Ross to bring them in. The *second climax* sees Cap, Winter Soldier, Black Panther, and Iron Man in Siberia. Zemo kills the other super soldiers and reveals that he wanted to pitch the

Avengers against each other in revenge for his family's death in Sokovia. As Black Panther arrests Zemo, the other three fight over Winter Soldier killing Iron Man's parents while under programming. Cap sends Iron Man a conciliatory message, but drops his superhero identity as he frees the unsanctioned superheroes from a supermax prison.

1. Asymmetrical Terrorism

CA: Civil War opens to a shot showing a Siberian landscape and the caption "1991" (0:00:13).⁷ The flashback immediately evokes what is sometimes called the End of History: the collapse of the USSR, and the supposed victory of Western liberal democracy against Communism as *the* stable system of government that can accommodate any threat imaginable (cf. Fukuyama 12). Since the film is based on the *Civil War* comic books, it could be assumed that it, too, uses a nostalgic Cold War mindset to simplify global terrorism as the dominant fearscape of the present day (cf. McClancy 116-118). The film, however, uses the end of the Cold War as a point of departure: rather than to dwell in clear opposing power blocks and ties to criminals to fight equal enemies, it shows a number of asymmetrical conflicts. This is significant, because superhero films still conventionally rely on the dualistic confrontation between superhero and supervillain despite the fact that genres like the spy thriller have already seen profound shifts towards asymmetrical conflicts.⁸

Other references to the end of the Cold War are manifold: during the flashback, for example, a red book with a yellow star is used (0:00:40), hinting at the 'little red book' containing quotes from Mao Zedong combined with the emblem of the USSR. When Cap tries to stop Winter Soldier from escaping in a helicopter, he does so on top of a CGI Paul-Löbe-Haus in Berlin:⁹ a building that symbolically bridges across the river Spree (1:10:09) to commemorate the site's history as part of the Berlin Wall. These iconic references are used to highlight the shift of predominant global conflicts from Cold War symmetry to a perceived asymmetry during the 'age of terror.' This gets more evident as the film proceeds to its first climax set at the Leipzig-Halle Airport, the name and logo of which are clearly visible in many shots during the sequence (e.g. 1:35:02). The site is used by the US Department of Defense to transport both troops and military equipment to and from the Middle East. It is thus a location linked to the 'war on terror.'

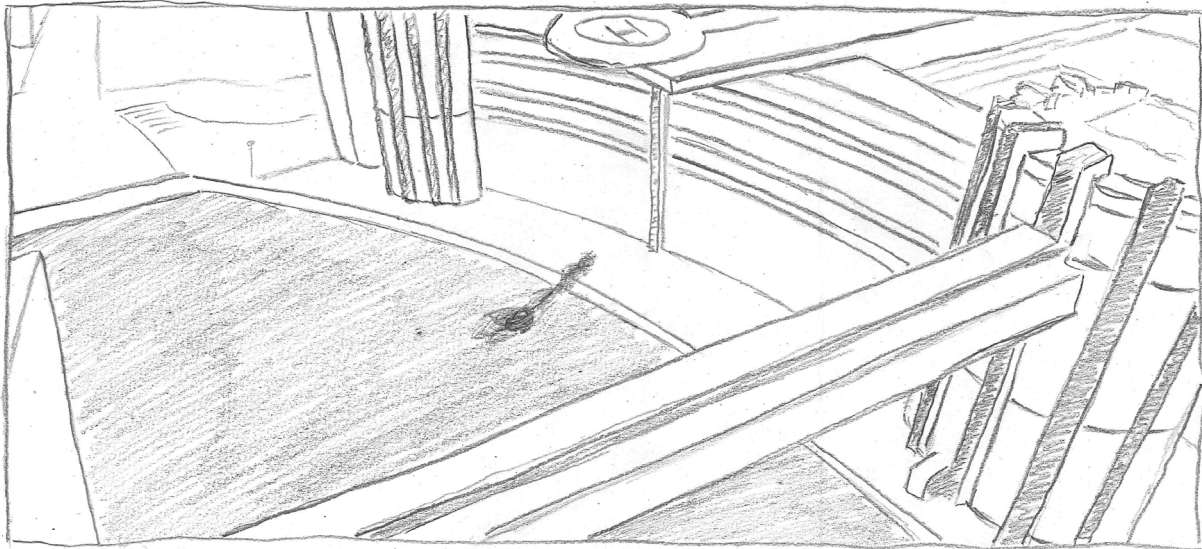


Fig. 1: the CGI bridge across the river Spree including the helicopter crash site (1:10:09). Illustrations were re-drawn by the author to avoid the use of copyrighted material.

The deliberate procedure towards locations linked to global terrorism serves one of the film's major themes: portraying the Avengers as a potential terrorist threat despite their own conception as a counter-terrorism unit. This is introduced in the opening scene. Scarlet Witch, the youngest addition to the team, attempts to divert an explosion at a public square in present-day Lagos using telekinesis, but accidentally directs the detonation towards a populated building (0:12:26-13:04). As she realises what has happened, the camera moves from a high to a low-angle medium close-up, mirroring how the event brings her back down to earth. As media reports confirm, she is blamed for the explosion: "What legal authority does an enhanced individual like Wanda Maximoff [Scarlet Witch] have to operate in Nigeria?" (0:19:37-43). Secretary Ross consequently suggests that the Avengers are vigilantes, and links the incident to a number of previous events they were involved in, including the Ultron catastrophe:

[Black Widow:] And what word would you use, Mr Secretary?

[Ross:] How about dangerous? What would you call a group of US-based enhanced individuals who routinely ignore sovereign borders, and inflict their will wherever they choose, and who, frankly, seem unconcerned about what they leave behind. New York. Washington, D.C. Sokovia. Lagos. (0:21:45-22:56)

Set against images of destruction from previous films, this portrayal as a coordinated group, as a threat to national security, as freely crossing

borders, and as pushing their own agenda are markers of terror cells to present-day audiences (cf. Dobkin 125-128).¹⁰ He even compares Thor and the Hulk, the two absent members of the team, to "misplaced [...] 30-megatonne nukes" (0:23:52-55), i.e. weapons of mass destruction.

The original cause for the explosion in Lagos is the secondary villain Crossbones, a remnant of the fascist group Hydra that had infiltrated various government organisations including S.H.I.E.L.D. earlier in the Marvel timeline. Crossbones illustrates the vicinity of counter-terrorist and terrorist efforts: he, too, operates from the security of a group, and his political impetus is lost in his violence. He is a conglomerate of two types of terrorist threats the Lagos scene establishes: he first attempts to steal a toxic substance, and eventually commits suicide using an explosive belt. His flat role of establishing connotations of 'terrorism' during the film's exposition is confirmed in a brief shot of two newspaper headlines next to pictures of his face: "Police Stations Robbed" and "Weapons Sold to Terrorists" (0:03:43). He serves as a foil to develop other characters against.

Apart from the early death of the secondary villain, the film's main antagonist also breaks the convention of present-day superhero films: Zemo neither has the costume nor the mask or the physicality that usually comes with a supervillain identity. As such, he markedly deviates from his portrayal in the Marvel canon. He is developed as a victim of the Ultron catastrophe by revealing that his family died in the incident, leaving him powerless in comparison: "And the

Avengers? They went home. I knew I couldn't kill them. More powerful men than me have tried. But if I could get them to kill each other..." (2:08:24-42, ellipsis in the original). Compared to Crossbones, Zemo thus illustrates the causes of global terrorism: neocolonisation through both trade and superimposed value systems (cf. Glynn 115, 121).¹¹ Bombing the UN meeting on the Sokovia Accords in Vienna is a result of his asymmetrical status compared to enhanced individuals in general and the Avengers in particular.

Asymmetry in the film's conflicts extends from a group of enhanced beings versus a regular person to enhanced beings in general versus government bodies. When a blurry picture of Winter Soldier as the supposed culprit of the Vienna bombing is released, Cap is irritated about the strategy behind the investigation. CIA agent Sharon Carter continues his thought: "You're saying someone framed him to find him" (1:02:54-57). Although Cap and Carter notice Zemo's hand in the event shortly after this conversation, inconsistencies linger on. While the film otherwise takes care to logically connect events, the picture's release is left unanswered to suggest that government organisations might have an interest in an enhanced individual being responsible for the attack as it would influence public opinion on the 'terrorist' status of a newly recognised social minority group that exceeds the agency or regular citizens and their governments.

To visually highlight this notion of imbalance, the two climaxes briefly suggest symmetry through shots that imitate comic-book panels; these symmetries, however, are quickly broken up and undermined. During the airport sequence the film escalates the conflict between those in

favour of and those against government oversight into converging blocks, with Cap, Falcon, Hawkeye, Ant-Man, Scarlet Witch, and Winter Soldier on one side, and Iron Man, War Machine, Spider-Man, Black Widow, Black Panther, and Vision on the other (1:35:16). The clear sides are quickly dispersed again: individual fights happen all over the airport, Ant-Man and Spider-Man rely on others to comprehend why they are fighting, and Black Widow briefly turns against Black Panther to help Cap (1:41:56-42:08). The point of the scene is his and Winter Soldier's escape from Iron Man, who was ordered to bring them in. As Falcon analyses: "This isn't the real fight. [...] We need a diversion" (1:38:33-38). This comes in the form of Ant-Man who switches to small and very large sizes for brief periods of time and thus highlights differences among the enhanced (e.g. 1:37:52, 1:42:25).

To avoid further casualties during the conflicts, both climaxes take place in isolated spaces: the airport is evacuated before Iron Man arrives (1:28:12-22), and the second climax returns to the now abandoned Hydra compound in Siberia. Here, too, a visual confrontation imitates an iconic panel from the *Civil War* comic books when Iron Man and Cap use hand ray and shield against each other (2:07:05). Instead of the impact this has in the hypotext, however, the scene lasts no more than two seconds in the film. Asymmetry dominates the sequence, since Iron Man faces both Cap and Winter Soldier (2:06:28). The conflict at this point has become emotional rather than based on evidence: Cap sees in Winter Soldier a childhood friend scapegoated by the authorities, whereas Iron Man sees the man who murdered his parents (2:06:08-12). At

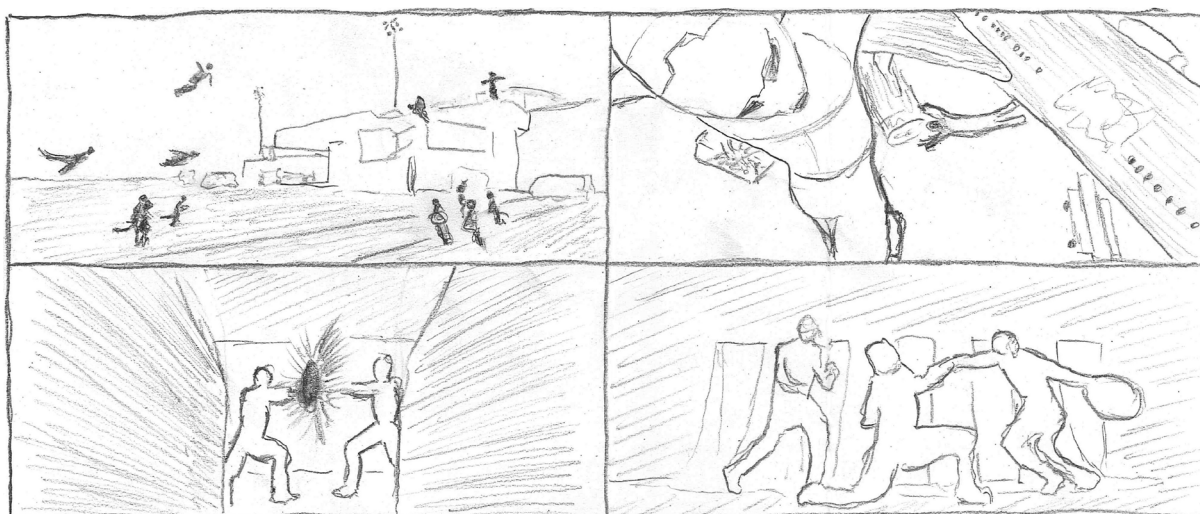


Fig. 2: brief symmetries and general asymmetries during the first climax (top row: 1:35:16, 1:42:25) and the second climax (bottom row: 2:07:05, 2:06:28).

the same time, Iron Man fears he is losing Cap's friendship (2:10:01-05). Highlighting the end of the Cold War, putting the Avengers in the vicinity of a terrorist cell, developing, and representing asymmetrical conflicts all serve to highlight increased agency as a potential threat, but the film subverts this sense of danger by portraying how enhanced beings interrelate.

The climax ends with Iron Man unable to move in his destroyed suit. He confronts his opponent: "That shield doesn't belong to you. You don't deserve it. My father made that shield" (2:11:35-55). In response, Cap drops both the shield and ultimately his suit: in the epilogue he is briefly shown wearing plain black clothes (2:16:46), suggesting that he has rejected the national authority both his armour and his superhero identity represented. Although it could be argued that the role as national hero is passed on from a soldier to an entrepreneur in this gesture, the film does not support such a reading. Cap is never referred to as Captain America, and the franchise uses the less exceptionalist title *The First Avenger* in international markets. In the context of the Sokovia Accords, the gesture is a consequence of respecting Iron Man's claim to his father's work and of Cap's opposition to vertical power.

2. Individual Accountability

This opposition stems from Secretary Ross' introduction of the Sokovia Accords. In response to the challenge posed by enhanced beings, government bodies aim to exert control through a treaty. While previous films have opted to introduce (and destroy) fictional organisations such as S.H.I.E.L.D. and the World Security Council, *CA: Civil War* uses representations of the UN and the US government directly. The Accords are introduced to the Avengers as a plan to remove their private status: "they'll operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel; only when and if that panel deems it necessary" (0:23:32-41). Those who reject the proposal have to face consequences:

[Black Widow:] And if we come to a decision you don't like?

[Ross:] Then you retire. (0:24:21-28)

'Retirement' serves as a metaphor for what happens to those who use their enhanced abilities if unauthorised by the UN panel: imprisonment and physical restraint (e.g. 2:15:18-41).

Ross visually portrays the Accords' power balance: enhanced individuals sit at the table while he stands upright and circles them

(0:21:02-24:30).¹² Although he thus treats them as the racialised group 'the enhanced,' the strength of his side of the argument lies in holding each of them accountable as an individual since they need to sign the Accords separately. Ross fabricates a choice to play by unnegotiated rules, and to be forced into a non-consensual chain of command. As Cap points out, the UN is "run by people with agendas, and agendas change" (0:30:38-41). The Accords thus establish vertical authority and codify an inhibition to act on abilities. The use of 'terrorist' as a reproach against opposition marks a neoliberal ideology that discredits positions it cannot immediately contain (cf. Glynn 127-128). While accountability and oversight are useful in ensuring that representative governments do, indeed, represent those who elected them, the film illustrates how this discourse is misappropriated to exercise hegemonic power over a racialised group.

Through the introduction of two new characters, Black Panther and Spider-Man, *CA: Civil War* juxtaposes the inhibiting political climate with the perspective of the enhanced. After the Vienna bombing, Black Panther is tempted to use his abilities to exact vengeance on Winter Soldier for the death of his father, King T'Chaka of the fictional country Wakanda (0:39:37-40:43). Towards the end of the film, however, he both prevents Zemo's suicide and helps to hide Winter Soldier from the public (2:08:45-09:32, 2:18:34-19:58). By bringing in the murderer of his father to the authorities, he rejects the notion of vigilantes taking the law into their own hands. At the same time he supports other enhanced beings against legislation he deems unjust.¹³ Spider-Man shows a similar tension. As Iron Man meets him to rally support for the Accords (1:18:14-22:28), the young superhero is asked to state his motivation:

Because I've been me my whole life. And I've had these powers for six months... I read books, I build computers, and... and yeah, I'd love to play football, but I... I couldn't then, so I shouldn't now. [...]
When you can do the things that I can, but you don't, and then the bad things happen, they happen because of you.
(1:20:50-21:25, ellipses in the original)

Spider-Man does not want to use his abilities to dominate others, but to live a meaningful life that enriches both his own and other lives. The multi-clause sentence at the end of his statement is an early version of what is known in the Marvel canon as 'with great power comes great responsibility.' The two characters represent a desire for agency combined with a moral code that both opposes inhibition and accepts responsibility.

In addition to such moderate positions, the film uses Winter Soldier to warn against what an ideal subject would look like under the Sokovia Accords: his story frames the narrative from the initial flashback set in Siberia to a mid-credits scene in Wakanda. During the flashback, Winter Soldier is being programmed by a Hydra agent to steal serum that creates enhanced beings and kill Iron Man's parents. The scene marks a character who has no agency: most of his memory has been wiped, and he can be programmed through a series of commands.¹⁴ What he is left with is the memory of his victims:

[Iron Man:] Do you even remember them?
[Winter Soldier:] I remember all of them.
(2:05:35-40)

His guilt and his inability to make educated decisions mirrors the chain of command created by the Accords. His inability to resist his programming is visualised through containers: he is woken up from a cryogenic chamber at the hands of Hydra (0:00:43-02:39), uses his arm to get out of his cell in Berlin (1:03:10-05:39), and ultimately decides for himself to be put into cryogenic sleep again (2:18:36-19:16). This decision is made possible only by removing his enhancement: at this point his prosthetic arm has been cut off by Iron Man (2:06:53).¹⁵

3. Relational Agency

Alongside individual accountability, the film presents a less hierarchical mode of legitimising agency necessitated by Scarlet Witch as a linear opposite of Winter Soldier: her gift of telekinesis marks her as possessing an excess of agency, to the point where she could manipulate others into acting as her puppet. Consequently she is the one blamed for the Lagos incident rather than Cap, and she is the only enhanced individual who is also restrained in addition to being imprisoned in the supermax prison (2:15:18). In an argument with Cap, Iron Man summarises the danger she poses in his view: "We don't grant visas to weapons of mass destruction" (1:00:51-54). He also references her foreign nationality, marked in the film by an indistinct Eastern European accent.¹⁶ Since the social structure notices a foreign type of agency it does not want to accommodate, the reaction is restraint.

Scarlet Witch's deviant role is marked through her contrast to Vision who matches her level of agency. He, however, is open to oversight as a strategy to appear less threatening (0:28:12-50). As a consequence, Iron Man employs him to lock Scarlet Witch into the Avengers

compound. At this point in the narrative, the relationship between her and Vision symbolises the consequences of the Sokovia Accords: under the premise of caring for her well-being through making dinner, he actually restricts both her movement and her agency by not letting her go to the grocery store (0:52:05-54:49). He reveals his true intentions when he physically keeps her from leaving:

[Vision:] It is a question of safety.
[Scarlet Witch:] I can protect myself.
[Vision:] Not yours. (0:54:18-28)

His willingness to both restrain his power and adapt to existing social structures is visualised earlier: since his body can move through objects, he enters Scarlet Witch's room through a wall, shown from a low angle to suggest vertical power. When Scarlet Witch confronts him, Vision replies: "Yes, but the door was open, so I assumed... [...] I'll use the door" (0:20:52, ellipsis in the original). He thus learns to comply with social norms. Vision's behaviour is an example of measured agency, i.e. carefully observing the structures around you and thus practising self-limitation in order to avoid the strong repercussions in place for deviant behaviour.¹⁷ Scarlet Witch, on the other hand, represents agency that is perceived as unbound.¹⁸

Instead of being universally excluded, however, she is part of a network around Cap that legitimises its actions through relational agency. During the initial mission in Lagos, for example, Cap, Black Widow, Falcon, and Scarlet Witch act as a team on their own accord without being assigned. Although they are physically in different locations, they can communicate through connected earpieces (i.e. 0:03:06-04:23). When they physically engage with Crossbones, their abilities are showcased in a way that emphasises practised but spontaneous cooperation, for example, when Scarlet Witch moves Cap up several stories of a building; she moves Crossbones' poisonous gas out of the building so that Cap can breathe as he takes out one of the villain's paramilitary units (0:06:30-07:24). To confirm that such ties between characters in the sense of relational agency are portrayed as positive, the occasional lack of mutual support gives Crossbones the upper hand: for example, when Black Widow enters the site alone, takes out several henchmen, but is then attacked by the villain (0:08:00-30). This slip in relational agency is rectified by a chase scene a few minutes later when Black Widow does the footwork to find the missing toxic substance. When she suddenly finds herself outnumbered, Falcon and his drone spontaneously help her out (0:10:13-11:16).

While cooperation here is enabled through technology, it can also be of an emotional nature. This is expressed in Cap's continued support for Scarlet Witch despite the public backlash (0:19:30–20:36), as well as in the faith he puts in Winter Soldier. The most interesting example, however, is a corner case where Cap keeps ties to both Peggy and Sharon Carter, who represent S.H.I.E.L.D., and the CIA respectively, and thus government bodies Cap usually distances himself from. He acts as a pallbearer at the funeral service for Peggy, another childhood friend. At the same time he finds out that Sharon is Peggy's grandniece, stressing his desire to cultivate close relationships with those around him (0:31:57–35:07). In her eulogy given in the honour of her grandaunt Sharon Carter advises him to "[c]ompromise where you can. Where you can't, don't. [...] [P]lant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye, and say: 'no, you move'" (0:33:17–41).¹⁹ She thus supports his decision not to sign the Accords, and later actively supports his resistance when she steals both his and Falcon's superhero suits from the CIA. This is despite the fact that they guard Winter Soldier who tried to kill her under Zemo's programming (1:25:31–2642).

In contrast to Cap's and Carter's gestures of mutual support, those around Iron Man fail to perform a similar feat: when Iron Man tries to help up the injured War Machine after a fall, for example, the latter refuses his aid, and thus emphasises a more individual notion of agency that the capitalist entrepreneur Iron Man originally stood for in the *MCU* (2:13:20–48). The pronounced failure

to maintain mutual ties between some characters also explains why Iron Man's unsuccessful relations to both his parents and his partner are called up during the exposition (0:14:38–15:25; 0:16:15–17:04). He compensates his lack of relational support through funding MIT student projects, and thus prefers a trickle-down gesture. While Iron Man, who symbolically attempts to pool available resources into his suit, represents hierarchy, Cap represents a network built around both providing resources to others and asking for help in return. Although providing and asking for support is compatible with traditional soldier heroism,²⁰ the deliberate and frequent portrayal of relational agency de-emphasises the individual and embeds them into a collective. Power is assigned not through rank, but in the interim, based on ability and context.

The tension between these two positions is visually expressed in the final scene before the credits: Iron Man sits between his official landline phone at the Avengers compound and an unregistered flip phone sent in the mail by Cap.²¹ While the landline symbolises stability and supposedly reliable access to an individual, the flip phone represents a more flexible network. Consequently, Iron Man gets a call from Secretary Ross on the landline phone. He ultimately keeps him on hold, however, in favour of honouring the connection to Cap, as shown through a camera tilt that includes the flip phone into the same frame (2:16:25). The symbolic meaning of the phone as a step in the direction of relational agency is emphasised through Cap's letter in a voice-over, imitating a first phone call:



Fig. 3: Iron Man caught in between his official landline phone and a flip phone provided by Cap in the foreground (2:16:25).

[...] My faith's in people, I guess... individuals. And I'm happy to say that for the most part, they haven't let me down. Which is why I can't let them down either. Locks can be replaced, but... maybe they shouldn't. I know I hurt you Tony. I guess I thought by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but... I can see now that I was really sparing myself. And I'm sorry. Hopefully one day you can understand. [...] If you need us, if you need me, I'll be there. (2:15:03-16:46, ellipses in the original)

In this letter, Cap both offers his support and apologises for failing to support Iron Man when he did not tell him about Winter Soldier's involvement in the death of his parents. "I was really sparing myself" marks his view that this decision lacked relational agency and thus excluded Iron Man. At the same time he states the existence of a network, cross-cut into the scene in the form of Scarlet Witch, Ant-Man, Hawkeye, and Falcon, who he is about to free from the supermax prison. By saying that "Locks can be replaced, but... maybe they shouldn't" he picks up on the physical restraint Scarlet Witch endures: Cap and his deliberately 'unauthorised,' underground network may destroy property when it is used to enforce strict hierarchy, but hope to convince others that mutual support is a better way of accommodating difference between individuals. By putting Secretary Ross on hold, Iron Man suggests that he considers keeping some room for manoeuvre in his relationship to the vigilante network.

4. Conclusion

Instead of a call for more oversight, *Captain America: Civil War* uses disaster caused by superheroes to depict the racialised discourse and the hegemonic exclusion of difference that individual accountability can cause. As this paper has shown, the film juxtaposes such an inhibitive political climate with a notion of dissent. Rather than ultimately reaffirming the strong role of government, as in the comic book event *Civil War* (cf. Veloso/Bateman 440), this film adaptation uses asymmetrical conflicts to develop a case for relational agency. Instead of vertically legitimising actions through clear superiors, the collective around Cap takes the form of a horizontal network. Although the narrative focalises on him, he does not take a dominant role in his collective within the diegetic world.

The film is symptomatic for a broader trend in recent blockbuster fiction and TV shows that embeds heroes into groups instead of depicting them as monomythical. Examples include films like *The Lego Movie* (2014) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), as well as TV shows such as *Sense8* and *Mr. Robot* (both since 2015). Although hero teams have existed before, these narratives negotiate the tension between hierarchies and networks that recent network theory suggests are a symptom of an ongoing erosion of neoliberalism as the hegemonic ideology. The 2008 economic crisis could be seen as a catalyst of this process, after which the emphasis on cooperation and mutual support in mainstream narratives has markedly increased.

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¹ 'Disaster' here refers to an unexpected event that causes widespread damage. 'Catastrophe' is the moral evaluation of such events.

² This paper uses the characters' superhero names throughout rather than switching between superhero and civilian identities. This is done to avoid confusion since the film is dense with characters already.

³ *CA: Civil War* was the highest-grossing film in 2016 (cf. "2016 Worldwide Grosses"). It is sometimes compared to *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), part of the *DC Extended Universe*. Although this film falls into the same narrative tradition as *CA: Civil War*, and both the Superman trial and the opposition to Batman's vigilante status might make for an interesting analysis, it is not discussed here due to its lack of thematic unity.

⁴ The omnibus edition of the comic-book event does not provide page numbers. Hence they are counted from the chapter's splash page and provided in square brackets.

⁵ Instead of 'posthuman,' this paper adopts the term 'enhanced individual' due to its usage in *CA: Civil War*. Marvel also employs the term 'inhuman' in its productions distributed by Disney, because it sold the screen rights to the term 'mutant' to Fox along with its *X-Men* franchise. DC refers to its characters as 'metahumans.'

⁶ Network theory is a vast field: Powell is an economist, Castells provides a sociological perspective, Hardt and Negri can be described as political philosophers, and Mason's view is that of a political activist. Out of the large pool of available analyses, Mason has the most solid grasp of precursors, present-day neoliberalism, and existing peer-to-peer efforts. For definitions of both network and hierarchy see Powell 303.

⁷ All time codes used in this paper refer to *CA: Civil War*.

8 The preceding films in the MCU, i.e. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and the two *Avengers* films, are notable exceptions in their portrayal of pluricentric conflict. Spy thrillers in the wake of *The Bourne Identity* (2002) serve as the prime examples of shifting towards asymmetry.

9 Locations in Germany are to be expected given that the film received money from Deutscher Filmförderfonds and FilmFernsehFonds Bayern. It is common practice, however, to disguise German locations if they do not fit the story. The scenes set in Bucharest, for example, were filmed in Berlin.

10 Increased agency as a potential threat to the public is a common motif in superhero narratives. Examples include the brief set-up of *The Incredibles* (2004) as well as the Sentinels and anti-mutant hysteria in the *X-Men* franchise. The specific depiction of a superhero team as a terrorist cell, however, is less common.

11 Religion is a possible, but not essential, value system subordinated by a hegemonic liberal ideal (cf. Glynn 119).

12 Iron Man sits apart in this conversation, since he considers himself part of the authority represented by Ross.

13 As the name Black Panther implies, the character alludes to historical civil rights movements.

14 The series of commands uttered in Russian can be read as fan service: “longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car” (0:01:12-35). Winter Soldier was born in 1917, he fell off a freight car before falling into Hydra’s hands, and the film teased by the on-screen caption “Spider-Man will return” (2:27:27) after the post-credits scene in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017).

15 The loss of arms or hands is a running joke across recent Marvel Studios films.

16 Her birthplace in the comics is Transia, a fictional Eastern European country similar to Sokovia.

17 Black Widow puts this into words: “If we have one hand on the wheel, we can still steer. If we take it off... [...] I’m reading the terrain. We have made some very public mistakes. We need to win their trust back” (0:31:14–30, ellipsis in the original). The ability to act is metaphorically connected to the freedom of movement.

18 It is unfortunate that the film develops unbound agency using a female character. And yet this is an accurate portrayal of patriarchy as a structure that suppresses female agency.

19 The passage could be identified as a clear case of self-righteousness if it was not embedded into an oration that calls up another civil rights movement (see note 13): Peggy Carter was a co-founder of S.H.I.E.L.D. after World War II, and thus broke with traditional gender roles at the time.

20 Cap’s opposition to government organisations could, of course, be read as a conservative talking point based on a stereotypically American notion of freedom. Such a reading would, however, place all vigilantes on the right side of the political spectrum, and ignore, among others, leftist movements that oppose representative government rather than government in general.

21 The delivery of the phone is used for another running joke (see note 15): Stan Lee is the messenger.

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