

Graduate Communication Association Conference

Work in Progress:

HULK SMASH IDEOLOGY!: Postracism and Xenophobia within *Marvel's The Avengers*

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Abstract:

This study endeavors to rhetorically criticize the ideological underpinnings found in the Marvel comic book film adaptation *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012). Specifically this study involves multiple viewings of the movie along with analysis of the ideological themes of postracism and xenophobia as evident in the film's dialogue, plot, character interactions and various other narrative devices and details. Adaptations of comic books have a long history within film and will continue to have a significant box-office presence for the foreseeable future. The Marvel Cinematic Universe alone, which began its present continuity in 2008 with *Iron Man*, will have produced twenty-one films by 2019. Additionally, *The Avengers* serves as a valuable artifact for examination for three reasons.

The first is that the film acts as a cornerstone of building the narrative of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in that it is the first time the other main characters (established within their own respective movies) are brought together to interact and also serves as a reference point for future events. For example, within *Iron Man 3* the psychological trauma suffered by the movie's titular character results from the events of *The Avengers* and functions as a significant plot detail. Similarly, *Thor: The Dark World* which immediately followed the release of *The Avengers* also advances the storylines for two of the main characters from *The Avengers*, Thor and Loki, as well as references events that occur in that film. The second purpose for studying this film is that it is currently ranked as the third highest grossing film worldwide, having made over \$1.5 billion (Dirks, 2014). It is reasonable to conclude from that figure that this movie has reached a significant number of people and therefore has a significant cultural impact. For example, according to comic book historian Jackson Miller (2014) comic book sales (not counting comic

book themed merchandise) rose from approximately \$250 million in 2000 to \$780 in 2013. This sudden resurgence of comic books into the mainstream means that the industry's representations of race are reaching an expansive audience and are thus worth critiquing. The third reason for studying the film is the plot of the film itself. The entire plot hinges on the group of heroes, each from very different backgrounds and demographic groups, confronting an external force. The resulting conflict forces the group to set aside, not resolve, interpersonal problems in order to defeat the external force. Essentially the team indulges in post-racist form of group cohesion by glossing over internal strife during the conflict with the external force; unity in the face of opposition, yet unity is not cemented and exists only so long as the opposition. In fact, as evident in the film, these internal struggles still manifest during the conflict. Xenophobic attitudes are further evident in the interpersonal relationships enacted by the characters and will be examined in detail in the study.

It is for these reasons that I have elected to examine this movie for its ideological messages. Ultimately this study seeks to add to the growing body of research that critiques comic books and other fantasy/science fiction themed forms of entertainment for messages concerning race, xenophobic attitudes, and the treatment of articulated "others".