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# **The Black Widow**

*A sympathetic analysis on the film character Natasha Romanoff in relation to character identification and female objectification*

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## Abstract

In this project I aim to determine how the character Natasha Romanoff encourages viewers identification in *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012), a film that features multiple character attachment, and how her being the only major female character influences that identification and how she is depicted. The film is a part of the Marvel cinematic universe, a high-grossing film franchise that boast of 21 film installments and multiple characters. A theory concocted by Murray Smith the ‘structure of sympathy’ is utilized to determine how the identification is achieved, along with broader concepts used in cognitive theory to describe the mental activity of viewers. Theories on female character objectification and action heroines are used to determine how her gender affects the identification and how the character is depicted. “Characters constitute a major entry point into our engagement with narratives” and viewers experience the narrative through the characters. The project however argues that this format, an action and adventure film featuring multiple characters, allows viewers to identify with the spectacle driven narrative as much as with individual characters. It furthermore argues that despite various elements used to encourage individual character identification, the characters gender was a dominating factor. The character is additionally repeatedly objectified and sexualized in *The Avengers* as well as additional installments within the franchise, and offered little challenge to the stereotypical depiction of female characters and action heroines.

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## Introduction

The task of watching a film feels relatively simple when it is in fact a complicated cognitive process that requires complete attention for comprehensive enjoyment. Audiovisual material or narratives, and especially films, enable identifying with a film in a way photography and stills cannot. Films temporarily create a fantastical world free from the temporal and spatial limits of reality. Film viewers are able to adapt to these temporal and spatial differences, and give up control of his body to devote all of their cognitive abilities on processing the audiovisual data (Grodal, 2009, p. 193). This “imaginative engagement with fictional narratives requires a basic notion of human agency” (Smith, 1995, p. 17) and “characters constitute a major entry point into our engagement with narratives”. Viewers seek out human or human-like agencies that the camera favors to engage with and “seek to establish their desires and goals” and foresee their destinies (Smith, 2010, p. 234).

The major trend in twenty-first century cinema is the blockbuster. Blockbusters are designed to target a wide group of viewers and are typically big, expensive and filled with special effects and spectacle (Lewis, 2008, pp. 410-414). Many of the contemporary blockbusters belong to a cinematic universe that consists of multiple films and features multiple characters. One of these is the Marvel cinematic universe that now boasts of 21 feature films, with a couple more in different stages of film production. The majority of the films feature members of a team called the Avengers which is formed in the franchise’s sixth film, *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012). The preceding five films feature 4 original members of the team and their individual journey of becoming superheroes that will ultimately join forces to conquer forces that threaten Earth. There are however 6 original members and only one of them is a woman; the Black Widow or Natasha Romanoff, a Russian spy turned American warrior. She is initially introduced in the franchise’s third installment, *Iron Man 2* (Favreau, 2010) in a supporting role and promoted to a major character in the ensemble film *The Avengers* (2012). In a film that features multiple characters, individual character identification is more challenging to achieve. The aim of this project is to determine how this particular character, the Black Widow or Natasha Romanoff, encourages viewers identification in *The Avengers*, a film that features multiple character attachment. To determine this, I will primarily use the ‘structure of sympathy’, a theory concocted by Murray Smith that divides the process of identifying with a character into three distinct steps. Smith’s theory is mainly a cognitive and narrative film theory, both of which are well established theories used to analyze films. Narrative film theory is used to examine narrative film structures, their nature

and their representation of reality (Barry, 2009, p. 215). Cognitive film theory is, among other things, concerned with the mental activity of viewers during film watching. The ‘structure of sympathy’ constitutes of three steps: recognition, alignment and allegiance which tend to bundle together and interact with each other. However, they are advantageous as distinct concepts in analyzing character identification. Each step focuses on different strategies and techniques used to enable character recognition, aligning viewers with characters and encouraging viewers to give allegiance to characters.

The film is classified as an action and adventure film. Action and adventure films have traditionally depicted male characters and female characters in very different ways which is why it is relevant to take into account how this female character is portrayed. The cognitive process of watching a film requires viewers to match the incoming audiovisual information with their own memory which allows them to comprehend the information and also to make inferences regarding characters and narrative. Viewers have pre-existing ideas on how female characters typically behave in films in relation to genre and other factors. Action and adventure films have traditionally depicted passive female characters that exist only in relation to a male character and are heavily objectified. The 70’s and 80’s introduced a transcending active female character, the action heroine, who was and is still somewhat limited by the confinement of the traditions associated with the passive female character. The relatively new superhero genre, the film also belongs to, features a similarly limited superheroine. The fact that the character, Natasha Romanoff, is the only major female character in *The Avengers* is an influential and relevant factor to consider when determining how she encourages character identification. Laura Mulvey’s theory on female objectification in film, as well as Jeffrey A. Brown’s perception of the stereotypical action heroine and superheroine, will be used to in relation to the identification of feminine factors and how they affect the character identification. Both authors draw their arguments from feminist film theory which is a broad and wide-ranging field that focuses on how women are represented in film. “The ideology of femininity is instilled in women through many forms of cultural texts”, and historically films “bound women to a “natural” female role of passivity and maternal nurturing under a dominant patriarch” (Hollinger, 2012). In this part of the analysis I continue to focus primarily on *The Avengers* with additional references from other films within the franchise if relevant and how female characters are depicted.

There has been a definite frustration with the Marvel cinematic universe’s lack of diversity in the films that almost exclusively feature white male superheroes. The lack of an

individual film featuring the Black Widow has been criticized in particular (Time, 2019). The members of the original team have all featured in three films focusing on their character aside from the non-superpowered Black Widow and Clint Barton or Hawkeye. The franchise is finally catching up with other franchises that have dared to feature female and non-white leads with two of their latest installments; *Black Panther* (2018) and *Captain Marvel* (2019). An individual film featuring Black Widow has been announced and will depict her transition from a Russian spy to an American warrior. This decade long exclusion and the unequal gender ratios are the principal reasons behind analyzing this particular character. It is baffling that perhaps the most successful film franchise of all-time features such a narrow depiction of reality. Women make up half of the world, films should reflect that fact. The ‘structure of sympathy’ is an optimal theory to break down the essential strategies and techniques used to promote the character and to reveal which patriarchal remnants still influence how female characters are depicted. Additionally, the multiple character attachment added an interesting component to the argument in determining if a lone female character could outshine multiple male characters who had already featured in their own individual film to encourage allegiance. It would be interesting to explore that further and seek to answer: *how the character the Black Widow encourages viewers identification in a film that features multiple character attachment, and how does the fact that she is the only major female character influence the identification and how she is depicted?*

The first half of the project relates the different theories and ideas used for the analysis in the second part. The first chapter focuses on the fundamentals of cognitive theory and the mental activity of the viewer leading into what the essential factors of character identification are. There are different theories concerning the level of identification from a completely detached experience to immersed simulation which I will compare and describe. The second chapter details the stages of the structure of sympathy as describe in Murray Smith’s book on the subject (1995). The third chapter is on gender and genre focusing on the genres of action and adventure and superhero. It also relates the history and characteristics of the action heroine as well as the superheroine and how they have traditionally been depicted. In the second part of the project these theoretical components are used to analyze the Black Widow. The first section of the analysis determines how each stage of the structure of sympathy is accomplished. The second section analyzes which strategies used for the structure stem from the cinema’s long history of objectifying women with specific focus on the subject of objectification.

## Cognitive film theory

Cognitive film theory is a vast concept, that some think is more “a stance, a perspective, or an approach” (Nannicelli & Taberham, 2014, p. 3). The theory emerged in the 1980’s as an alternative approach to studying and analyzing film (2014, p. 2). The idea for cognitive film theory originates in cognitive sciences and it is subsequently more scientific than other film theories. Originally, the theory’s focus was on formal film features which gradually expanded to additional dimensions, particularly the emotional effect a film has on the viewer (Ertlöv Hansen, 2016, p. 309) or more specifically the cognitive mental activity of film viewers (Nannicelli & Taberham, 2014, p. 4). The aim is to determine “how viewers respond to moving image artworks and why they respond as they do” (2014, p. 8) by studying the cognitive mechanism of the human mind and the synchronal physical reflexes that follow. The approach on the mental activity of the viewer is primarily based on a cognitive psychological background though it often borrows aspects from analytical philosophy (Christiansen, 2016). The focus in this chapter is on the various aspects of the mental activity of the viewer. First, I discuss classical narrative conventions and how they relate to cognitive film theory. A clarification on the narrative is essential because the cognitive process and character engagement, subsequently discussed, are influenced by how the audiovisual information is presented. Secondly, I discuss different aspects on the mental activity of viewers with focus on Torben Grodal’s PECMA flow and Ed S. Tan’s theory on engaged and detached film viewing. Lastly, I summarize and compare selected theories on character engagement.

## Narrative

“Narrative is a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). A narrative consists of a story and a plot. Story refers to the events presented in the narrative, and plot to how those events are “edited, ordered, packaged, and presented” (Barry, 2009, p. 215), “a story is a sequence of events brought into focus by one or a few living beings” (Grodal, 2009, p. 159). This narrative form is typically used in fictional films. The standard form of conveying film that engages the viewer is the classical film narrative. The classical film narrative “centers on one or more central characters who propel the plot with a cause-and-effect logic”, is presented in linearly with focus on specific goals and features an omniscient or restricted narration (Corrigan & White, 2009, p. 263). These

formats capture real-life experiences effectively and present the story linearly with focus on specific goals.

Ole Ertløy Hansen defines cognitive theory as a mental process where viewers are provided with style and plotline which they use to construct the story (2016, p. 310). Style refers to the cinematography, picture and sound, and is determined by the filmmakers. Plot is the structure of the events presented, the dramatic composition. The plot can leave out information that is estimated through cognitive assumptions. Excluding information is a tactic to keep the viewer interested, and can delay his construction of the story. The story is then the mental construction created by the viewer's interpretation of the style and plot elements. This is a very basic definition that does not explain the cognitive process in detail. The next section explores various theories on cognitive process mechanism, specifically the mental activity of viewers.

## Mental activity of viewers

Torben Grodal created a model of the viewer's cognitive process he named the PECMA flow (perception, emotion, cognition, and motor action) (2009, p. 146). Films are an audiovisual experience that affect us in various ways. His model ratifies contemporary theories within neurology and situates each processing component in a specific part of the brain. The flow is in short: incoming visual information is analyzed, associated with previous knowledge or memory, cognitively appraised and the appropriate physical reflexes are determined (as in both which, and if they are relevant). This process stimulates the viewer's identification with the film which is also dependent on the viewer's previous, personal experience, emotional assessment and culture (Grodal, 2009, p. 147). The flow is cultivated with goal identification and completion: the viewer identifies goals and sub-goals the audiovisual information presents, and goal completion then ensures a continuous PECMA flow (Grodal, 2009, pp. 151, 160). This goal-setting also orients emotional responses. Watching a film takes effort and the viewer needs to be motivated, emotionally driven. The driving emotion is interest and a realistic goal sustains the interest (Tan, 2014, p. 109). There are two modes of interest in the audiovisual material: engaged and detached. In the engaged interest mode the viewer is focused on story events and characters, while in the detached interest mode he or she is more focused on filmic events (the cinematography, or narration utterances for example) (2014, p. 109). A classical narrative is generally designed to achieve



engaged viewing where the focus is on story events and characters, and filmic style is used “as means to an end” (2014, p. 110). Filmmakers can show events “in ways that promote either engagement or detachment” (2014, p. 110) and specific genres regulate engagement and detachment with close or restricted access to characters. They can also offer “innate bail-out mechanisms like laughter and tears” (Grodal, 2009, p. 151) which are active responses to the emotions signaled in films.

Cognitive film theory was, prior to the model on PECMA flow, not concerned with emotions and their effect on the viewer’s cognitive process (Grodal, 2016, p. 325) and many cognitive film theorists that focus on the mental activity of the viewer disagree over the cognitive and emotional effect audiovisual media has. There are different views as to if the emotional response to film is voluntary or involuntary, observational or simulative. Grodal considers film viewing to be a simulative act where the viewer simulates the emotions and actions of the story events and characters on-screen. He believes the viewer generally becomes completely engaged, and that emotional responses are involuntary. The first step of the PECMA flow matches the acquired visual information with the viewer’s previous knowledge or memories. “... memories are always stored with an emotional tag” (Grodal, 2009, p. 149) and they produce an emotional response in the viewer to the visual information when he matches it with previous knowledge. That process makes emotions a vital part of the PECMA flow. Human beings possess the ability to distinguish between reality and fiction. Watching a film however can be an overwhelming activity which triggers a strong emotional response. The viewer therefore simulates the emotions featured on the screen (Grodal, 2016, p. 326) as he becomes engrossed in the film. The emotional investment the viewer experiences, can also create an illusion of reality where the viewer responds to the fiction as if it were real while knowing it is not. While the viewer is still able to distinguish between reality and fiction, he is tricked into simulating the fiction’s principles whether or not they match his own (Smith, 1995, p. 42).

When a viewer has matched the visual information with previous knowledge, he appropriates an action based on his cognitive assessment. The act of estimating an action is called *action readiness*; a contemplation of the possible active responses to an emotion (Tan, 2014, p. 107). It means that the viewer experiences strong feelings toward the information on screen without taking action in reality as a response to the emotion. Viewers model the action cognitively and simultaneously anticipate the action to materialize on screen. Viewers also model their emotions; “cinema-members usually remain quiet while watching even though

they might be going through intense emotions” (Tan, 2014, p. 106). They are therefore not too overwhelmed to refine their emotional responses and are engaged with the fiction without completely losing the ability to distinguish between reality and fiction. Emotions are further complicated by withheld information. That means that the anticipated action and emotional response can rapidly change based on new information presented on screen. The cognitive process the viewer experiences is therefore simultaneously modeling the emotions on-screen and having an emotional response to the action taken (Grodal, 2009).

Noël Carroll and Murray Smith disagree to an extent with Grodal’s stance on simulation and consider emotional film engagement to be more or less voluntary. Carroll considers film watching to be purely observational and emotional responses to be voluntary and primarily sympathetic. He does not deny the emotional impact a film narrative can have, but does not consider the viewer’s emotional response to be simulative as Grodal does (Grodal, 2009, pp. 181-182) (Smith, 1995, pp. 78-79). Smith considers film engagement predominantly through character engagement and divides the process into three basic levels. This process, *structure of sympathy*, is discussed further in the next chapter but he considers the engagement to be voluntary. He does however distinguish between sympathetic and emphatic responses to film. The sympathetic responses are primarily voluntary but the emphatic responses can be involuntary. The emphatic responses are: emotional simulation which is voluntary, affective mimicry and autonomic response which can be involuntary. Affective mimicry is essentially mimicking the action or emotions viewed and filmmakers can manipulate an involuntary response with close-ups (1995, pp. 99-100). The idea of affective mimicry is similar to Grodal’s theory on simulation. The difference is that Grodal considers film viewing to be primarily simulative while Smith classifies affective mimicry as an intermittent involuntary response.

Autonomic responses are reflexive reactions to filmic events. A good example of an autonomic response is the *startle response*. Startle response refers to when viewers are alarmed, startled or surprised and actively respond by perhaps jerking or jumping. The startle effect is a particularly common when watching horror or thriller films though not exclusive to those genres. The startle event can perform “a number of functions”: narrative development (plot point), symbolism and, the thrilling “whomp”, a feeling similar to the sensation felt on rollercoasters, and typical for action and horror films. The narrative functions leading up to the startle are generally designed to prime the viewer and put him “in an anxious and fearful state”, where he is more likely to be startled (Smith, 2014, p. 35). These functions are

designed to distract the viewer; relaxed characters or cheerful music for example. The startle effect is an involuntary response that cannot be, under normal circumstances, prohibited (2014, p. 35).

Even though cognitive film theorists disagree on how viewers engage with film the mental activity of viewers is clearly a complex cognitive process. The pedagogic theory of cognitive load suggests that human beings have a limited brain capacity to work with when learning new information (Paas, 2003). Based on the multiple aspects of mental activity, while watching a film, the process must take a lot of work and should explain how involuntary autonomic responses sometimes slip out, like laughter, tears and jumping when startled. The film theorists discussed in this section all agree that active film viewing requires a character to act as the medium for the viewer. They disagree over both the appropriate term for character engagement and the level of engagement, but consider a character to be the key in engaging with film and other audiovisual media. The different ideas on character identification are discussed in the next chapter.

## Character identification

“Characters constitute a major entry point into our engagement with narratives” and viewers seeks out human or human-like agencies that the camera favors to engage with and “seeks to establish their desires and goals” and foresee their destinies (Smith, 2010). The human agency creates a vessel for the viewer to experience the narrative through. Classical film narration generally features omniscient or restricted narration that presents the narrative from one or more third-person perspectives (Corrigan & White, 2009, pp. 257-258). Restricted narration has proven successful in engaging the viewer seamlessly. The viewer is not entirely situated as the protagonist, but is privy to the characters POV which has proven successful. The narrative is therefore experienced from the POV of a specific character (or more). This leads to what Murray Smith calls an identification between the viewer and character. Viewers have a basic person schema they revert to, to identify a suitable or humanized character. Schema is a collection of related information that simplifies the action of processing information. The identification requires a character that has a humanized body, perceptual activity, intentional states, emotions, linguistic abilities, self-interpretation and traits (Smith, 1995, p. 21). The film provides additional information the viewer adds to his construction of the character, as well as making inferences based on his previous knowledge

(the second stage in the PECMA flow). Identification is augmented if the viewer is provided with “ample information about the characters situation, emotions and goals” (Grodal, 2009, p. 197). The viewers own personal preferences and culture are also influential in character construction, though the illusion created by film engagement can temporarily adjust those preferences. The restricted narration creates an environment of strong engagement with the central character perspective, which is what maintains and implements the illusion.

The cognitive film theorists discussed in the previous chapter disagree over the appropriate term for character engagement. Smith’s idea of the process, and his use of the term identification is discussed above. Carroll proposes the term *assimilation* to describe the relationship between viewer and character because he feels identification implies that they merge together. He considers the emotional response from the viewer to be either sympathetic or similar based on the separate feelings it invokes in him. Viewers can therefore share emotional states with characters based on their own evaluation as opposed to mimicking the characters emotion. Grodal terms the process simulation because he considers it to be a simulation of the characters emotions, movements and actions. This simulation is not only a part of film viewing, but also a vital part of how human beings identify with each other, show empathy and similar emotions. Personality is influenced by different people a person has imitated and some aspects have been acquired by watching films (Grodal, 2009, p. 189). Smith calls this simulation emphatic mirroring which refers to mirroring the events on screen. Viewers consistently mimic characters and their emotions and “any form of physical action, expression, or sensory experience can act as a prompt to emphatic mirroring” (Smith, 2014, pp. 37-38). Filmmakers use “technical and narrative skills to influence or even control the viewers experience” and with close-ups of a characters facial expressions they can, for example, trigger involuntary emotional simulation (Grodal, 2009, pp. 191, 187). Even though Smith and Grodal disagree on the level of character engagement, Grodal’s overall simulative ideas coincide with Smith’s theory on intermittent involuntary responses.

Characters are essential components for the driving emotion of film viewing, interest as “our propensity to respond emotionally to fictional characters is a key aspect of our experience and enjoyment of narrative films” (Smith, 1995, p. 1). Characters are a narrative representation of real people and, they give meaning to the narrative sequence. A character can be thought of as the anchor, an agency to sustain the narrative and for the plot to revolve around and, subsequently an agency for the viewer to identify with. Comprehension of the narrative is, therefore, best achieved through character identification. Complete immersion,

the simulation Grodal describes, can create an illusion where the viewer temporarily abandons his own principles, his interests are irrelevant in the diegetic world presented on screen. The illusion allows the viewer to identify “with characters they would dislike in real life” (Grodal, 2009, p. 202). Smith agrees with that, given that they have some positive moral traits, but he suggests that this is because “human beings have an innate disposition to be intrigued by immoral and perverse activities” (2009, p. 80). Identification is however also dependent on the viewers class, gender, or ethnicity. Certain differences, or a multitude of differences, can create a conflict for the viewer which might result in detached viewing. This can for example happen when a group of a specific nationality is presented as the antagonist, and viewers of that nationality find the negative representation too difficult to endure. Attending to both an identification and contemplating his own thoughts as an observer can create too much cognitive load which is why the viewer is generally either engaged or detached. Overpowering emphatic emotions such as pity, shame or embarrassment can also trigger detachment, though these can be an intentional bail-out mechanism as discussed in the previous section. Laughter is an important bail-out tool, which is why comedy is so popular, and counteracts shame and embarrassment (Grodal, 2009).

Characters are systematically presented to encourage identification because they serve as the medium for the viewer to follow and identify with the narrative. To determine and analyze the process of character identification as encouraged by the film, Murray Smith created the method *structure of sympathy*, which is described in the next chapter (1995, p. 73).

## Structure of sympathy

Murray Smith wrote a book on character identification where he relates his theory on the different autonomic, cognitive and affective responses to film characters (1995). His ideas on the autonomic and affective responses were discussed in the previous chapter. The majority of his book is however devoted to the *structure of sympathy*. The structure of sympathy functions as a format to systematically analyze the cognitive process of identifying with a film character. The method consists of three descriptive concepts that describe the stages of identification: *recognition*, *alignment* and *allegiance*. The stages essentially describe the points in the film where viewers recognize a character, are put into alignment with the characters narrative perspective, and evaluate the characters morals and values. The stages tend to overlap and interact with each other but are advantageous as distinct concepts in

analyzing character identification. The first two stages are primarily cognitive while the third stage, allegiance, is an emotional phenomenon as well. The following sections describe the primary foundation for the analysis in this project, that is, the three stages of the structure of sympathy as described in Murray Smith's book; *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (1995).

## Recognition

The first stage is recognition which describes the cognitive process of recognizing characters in film. Viewers construct a character out of the textual elements presented by assigning them to a body. The person schema, discussed in the previous chapter, is a vital component of recognition. Viewers revert to their constructed person schema to first distinguish human character from non-human characters, and then adapt the character's body and face to the schema. This initial step is called individuation and relies on distinguishing the physical features of a character. The character needs to have a recognizable body, face and voice to be individuated. In classical film narratives "the individuality of at least the major characters is established quickly and unambiguously" predominantly by the physical attributes (Smith, 1995, p. 132). When viewers are familiar with the physical attributes, they re-identify the character which establishes the characters continuity. Visually noticeable characters that are not clearly recognizable are called stick figures and re-identification is generally impossible with stick figures as they have not been recognized as individuals. Names can be influential in initial character construction though they are not necessary at this point. They can imply family connections or societal status for example like father or my lord which viewers match with previous knowledge on the title (Smith, 1995, p. 118). In recognizing and re-identifying the character, viewers have only been familiarized with visible body and face attributes and perhaps voice. Viewers correlate these attributes to similar ones embodied by real people and make stereotypical assumptions. Assumptions are always susceptible to change but most of them are reinforced, rather than undermined. Star personae is also influential in character construction. The assumptions viewers make are often based on their familiarity with previous roles played by the actor or actress portraying the character, or their public persona.

Recognition is commonly considered an obvious and automatic process that can be overlooked. Smith, however, shows that the process is relevant to and an influential factor in

how viewers are later aligned with characters. Viewers are more likely to respond emotionally to characters when this basic level of engagement has been achieved (Smith, 1995, p. 138).

## Alignment

The second stage, alignment, describes the process where viewers “are placed in relation to characters in terms of their actions, and to what they know and feel” (Smith, 1995, p. 83). Identification is essentially achieved by systematically restricting the information available to viewers which is interesting because the film discussed in this project features omniscient narration. The major characters are emphasized using “framing, shot-scale, blocking, dialogue, and so forth” (1995, p. 125), and the narrative is linked to one or more of those characters. An example of this type of narration is the restricted narration which depicts a “limited third-person perspective” (Corrigan & White, 2009, p. 258). Restricted narration does however generally confine itself to only one or two character, while another standard form of classical film narration, the *omniscient* narration, presents all elements of the plot from multiple third-person perspectives. The narration in *The Avengers* (2012) is linked to multiple characters, including the antagonist but not entirely which is why it is not entirely omniscient. The effect the omniscient narration has on the identification is however discussed in the discussion section following the sympathetic analysis.

Both the restrictive and omniscient narrations link the narration to the perspective of the characters which puts viewers in alignment with them. There are two prominent structures of alignment: *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*. Spatio-temporal attachment means that the narrative attaches itself to the path of a specific character or characters, the narration follows these characters more than others giving them significance and viewers more access to them. Narratives that are linked to multiple characters use several techniques to coordinate the spatio-temporal attachment. These include: voice-over, intertitles, split-screen and a phone-call where one character is seen and the other is heard. The technique used in *The Avengers* is predominantly cross-cutting between spatially separate characters; “the distinct lines of action [are] successively” represented by cutting from one location to another with synchronous sound (1995, p. 146).

Subjective access describes the access viewers are granted to the disposition and current states of the characters, what they “desire, believe, feel, think, and so forth” (Smith, 1995, p. 143). Subjective access to characters can vary both between characters and films.

Viewers are generally given more access to the major characters, which is also how they identify these characters. Character subjectivity is constructed out of the information on the character (traits), emotional state and dialogue. Voice-over can be effective in granting access to the character's thoughts and feelings. Smith also considers performance to be a vital (and overlooked) component in looking at character subjectivity. Classical filmmaking depends heavily on facial expressions and bodily gestures to convey information on a character's state of mind (1995, p. 160). Specifically, facial expressions which can be a powerful method of conveying the emotional state of characters. Music can likewise indicate the inner states of characters by framing a character and associating music to the sight of him. The music can then later signify both the characters presence and also link the current point in the narrative to a previous one indicating a significance for the character (Smith, 1995, p. 152).

Subjective access can be restricted to one or two characters which creates a pattern of alignment that filters all narrative information through alignment with the character. The amount of knowledge afforded to both viewers and characters is different between genres. The classical narration forms, in terms of knowledge distribution, are the detective film and the melodrama. The distribution of knowledge is very restricted in the classical detective film; viewers are generally attached to the protagonist and access the same information the character does. In contrast, the melodramatic narration offers multiple character attachment providing viewers with more information than any individual character. Contemporary superhero films feature different kinds of narrative access. Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the films that revolve around a single superhero generally restrict the narrative to that superhero, while the films that feature a superhero team attach the narrative to multiple characters. The genre as a whole is though not as straightforward in knowledge distribution as the detective and melodrama typically are.

Point-of-view (POV) shots are generally discussed in regards to character identification as they are thought to be influential in aligning viewers with characters. A POV shot "represent[s] the field of vision of a character in the story world at a particular moment in the story" (Smith, 1995, p. 163). Smith suggests however that the POV shot alone is not exclusively influential in prompting alignment but rather POV structures. The POV shot functions as a "marker' ... of alignment with a character" (1995, p. 161), and a structure of the POV shot and a reaction shot is common in classical cinema to indicate a character's emotional response and state of mind. A reaction shot shows the character and his reaction to what he is gazing at. The shot shows the characters facial expressions which are, as stated



before, a powerful method of demonstrating a character's emotional state. Affective mimicry is often triggered with close-ups of facial expressions.

Filmmaking that stimulates alignment effectively can trigger a simulative state of identification, where viewers and characters share "an identical mental state" (1995, p. 181), an ideal foundation for the last stage of the structure of sympathy; allegiance.

## Allegiance

Allegiance is the third stage in the structure of sympathy and describes the viewers moral evaluation of characters. A number of theorists consider allegiance to be merely a feature of alignment. Smith considers allegiance to be the only stage that is an emotional response as well as a cognitive response which results in him distinguishing between the two. Viewers use the knowledge acquired in individuating, re-identifying and aligning with characters to morally evaluate them. This cognitive process is very dependent on the emotional response viewers have to a character's traits and action when matching them with their own memory. The characters traits are evaluated in regards to other characters, memory and viewers own preferences. Viewers rank the characters according to how morally desirable they are. Characters can vary from being "defined by a single trait" or "a composite of many traits" (Smith, 1995, p. 116). How filmmakers present the characters can be very influential in regards to allegiance, the presentation can create an illusion and influence viewers to ally with characters that they would morally object to in reality. "Something like a suspension of values must occur if we are to explain the spectator aroused by the gangster film, against her better judgment" (Smith, 1995, p. 189). The moral status of a character should also be clear and there should be a center of positive moral values for viewers to identify in order to construct their idea of a happy ending within each specific story.

Allegiance is primarily based on a structure of moral orientation. The most prominent structure of moral orientation is the Manichean moral structure. The Manichean moral structure has a very clear distinction of good and evil, characters either possess good traits or evil. The structure was considered the essence of the melodrama which many contemporary genres derive from, including the adventure genre. The graduated moral structure is however more typical for melodramatic films from the 1930's-1950's where the distinction between good and evil characters is not as clear. Characters are either more inclined towards one side but can possess both desirable and undesirable traits. These two structures are the foundation

for Hollywood's moral structure or the classical moral system which is the dominating moral system in Hollywood (Smith, 1995). Superhero films generally feature a clear distinction of good vs. evil though the overall narratives of the contemporary superhero franchises have incorporated a more unclear distinction with subjective access to the antagonists and their moral redemption.

There are a number of general techniques used to indicate which moral attitude the character has, as in if he is a morally desirable character or not. The techniques discussed here are character action, iconography, music and linguistic techniques. Character action is an essential component of moral orientation. How a major character treats minor characters such as animals, children, the old, the sick or other seemingly inferior characters is significant in signaling his moral attitude. A minor character's sole function could merely be to demonstrate the major character's treatment of that character in order to create a situation for viewers to morally evaluate the character. Iconography is a part of "the 'automatized' level of filmic comprehension" and influential in moral orientation (Smith, 1995, p. 192). The effects of iconography are not necessarily conscious, they can come from culturally constructed ideas on racial types or genres for example. These ideas can have an effect on how the character is morally evaluated, in individuating a character their physical attributes are matched to the viewers memory where culturally constructed ideas on those physical attributes or the context they are presented in reside. This is an example of the effect culture can have on the mental activity of viewers, as discussed in that section in the previous chapter. Music is another component of moral orientation. Specific instruments or melodies can be stereotypical and suggestive of the characters moral values. Various linguistic techniques can also be influential in moral orientation. Certain sociolects are suggestive of the character's cultural background and "epithets with a moral dimension, and symbolically charged proper names" can be linked to moral values associated with those tags or names in the viewers memory (1995, p. 193).

The text, or narrative, as a whole is also influential in moral orientation. The context within a text can govern the viewers sympathies, viewers rank the characters and side with the least objectionable as mentioned before. All the components discussed above are evaluated within the context of the text they are presented in and also the co-text. "The co-text is the set of values, beliefs, and so forth which form the backdrop to the events of the narrative" (Smith, 1995, p. 194). The co-text in contemporary work is generally congruent with the values and beliefs of reality making the evaluation simple as it is relatively compatible to the viewers values and beliefs. That does however mean that some of the values and beliefs built on in

older films have become obsolete, the racial roles presented in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) for example. How the POV shot is done can also influence moral evaluation. Traditionally, the POV shot presents an objectifying male gaze on female bodies which can bother feministic viewers and negatively influence their moral evaluation of a character. The traditional objectification of female bodies in film is discussed further in the next chapter. A final component must be taken into account in considering the structure of moral orientation, the viewers. Viewers can share a schema on film narratives, cultural beliefs and values and character stereotypes but they will still not perceive the film in exactly the same way. People do not interpret any material in the exact same way and the moral values of a character are therefore evaluated differently (Smith, 1995).

The structure of sympathy method created by Murray Smith is the primary format used in the analysis in this project. Further analysis on the character in question, the Black Widow, is based on the genre ideology of the action heroine and superheroine. The next chapter describes the major characteristics of the dominating genres of *The Avengers* (2012) and these two corresponding forms of female characters.

## Genres and gender

*The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) is classified as an action, adventure and sci-fi film on the International Movie Database (2012). Despite the sci-fi label I have chosen to exclude any particular discussion on that genre. The sci-fi label lies more in the ideological elements of science fiction, spaceships and aliens, which are in this film originally adapted from Norse mythology and are therefore an expendable complication from my fundamental discussion on active superheroes. The film is primarily a superhero film which is a subgenre of the action genre (Lewis, 2008, p. 359) and I will therefore discuss the action and adventure genre and the superhero genre in this chapter. The following sections detail the dominating characteristics of the two genres, with a specific focus on the increasingly popular action heroine.

## Action and adventure

The genres action and adventure have been a staple of Hollywood since the 1910's, both separately and together (Tasker, 2004, p. 3). Both genres really derive from the melodrama, a genre that typically indicates a female driven or family-oriented drama film to many viewers. The genre was however once associated with action and sensation and many "masculine" genres are now considered melodramatic; the adventure film, the horror movie and the gangster film for example. The Manichean structure of good vs. evil, discussed in regards to allegiance, was definitive for melodrama and fell to the 'masculine' descendant genres (Smith, 1995, p. 206). "Contemporary film culture tends to value narrative over spectacle" and action is therefore not held in high regard critically as it generally emphasizes spectacle and features simple plotlines (Tasker, 2004, p. 2). Action is furthermore associated with the emergence of the blockbuster and popularity of action films is often equated with low quality. In action and adventure films the action provides the spectacle and the adventure the narrative. Together the genre offers films featuring "spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions [and] state-of-the-art special effects" (Neale, 2004, p. 71). The action elements present the adventure narrative elements in a thrilling and spectacular way. The spectacle has a thematic significance because visual display has become a defining feature of the genre. The spectacle needs staging, a narrative context and the narrative can also be developed visually. Even though action and adventure films come across as narratively simple the beauty in their visual spectacles should be appreciated (Tasker, 2004, p. 3).

The narrative component of the genre, adventure, generally features an easily identifiable hero on a mission that must face a range of obstacles along the way to complete the (Saricks, 2009, p. 21). The characteristics of the contemporary action and adventure film are traced to the premiere of the Bond series which feature an identifiable hero and an abundance of spectacles (Lewis, 2008, p. 359). The Bond films repeat a certain formula which offers stability to the viewer, knowledge of what to expect. The character has been portrayed by multiple characters but is identifiable as a desirable, capable and resourceful hero with access to cool gadgets and sexually available women. Action and adventure films of the 80's and 90's built upon the formula of featuring a desirable, competent and resourceful action hero where the emphasis on visible masculine strength was gradually magnified. The heroes became visibly physically strong, desirable, suitably armed and while supremely good, defiant of authority. This emphasis on masculine strength required a narrative form that generated

situations to put the male body on display for the viewer's visual pleasure (Tasker, 1993, p. 2). Filmmakers of the 80's and 90's also introduced a supporting male character to aid the hero in their mission (the 'buddy movie'). The supporting male character was often an unlikely comrade, with different principles that balances out the hero's excessive style (Lewis, 2008, p. 360).

The action and adventure genre is usually considered very masculine and historically it was produced by male filmmakers, featured a male hero and was aimed at male viewers (Tasker, 2004, p. 9). Action, in particular, can be described as a male-oriented approach of conveying a film narrative with emphasis on "physical movement, violence and suspense" and less emphasis on emotion. The genre format inspires detached viewing with influencing autonomic responses like the startle effect, and often comic relief. However, despite the genre's impassive and masculine label there are a number of films within the genre that feature a female character; the action heroine.

### The action heroine

Action heroines have been an intermittent phenomenon throughout film history that interest the media and viewers each time as if they are completely unique. All female characters, including action heroines, have traditionally been objectified in film as an erotic object for the male character, and viewers, to look at. They are shown from a male character's POV encouraging alignment with the male character and camera objectifying the female characters as sexualized objects to be looked at. The cinema perfected the female and "[built] the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 17). The particular objectification of female characters is a result of the patriarchal society where women's lack of a penis invokes fear of castration in men. The conclusion was a female character whose only purpose was to be an incentive for the male characters and an erotic object to be looked at. Interaction with a passive female character (saving or punishing for example) or eroticizing her diminishes the castration anxiety. Action and adventure films have traditionally embodied this objectification of female characters, especially the Bond series where the female characters' entire purpose was to be saved and sexually obtained by the protagonist, James Bond. The more recent films of the series have however tried to update the female image with introducing an active female character that has been a part of the genre for some time now; the action heroine.

An action heroine is an active female character that leads the narrative, “makes her own decisions and fights her own battles” (Brown, 2011, p. 11). She is aggressive, strong and heroic and transcends normative cinematic and cultural gender codes (Hills, 1999, p. 38). The idea of the action heroine originates in various female characters such as the fictional 40’s female detectives, femme fatales, 50’s tomboys and leather-clad mod heroines of the 60’s. Active female characters from comic books and video games have also been influential, especially in regards to how they are styled. Wonder Woman’s costume, for example, is “sexually charged and revealing” which created a stereotypical standard for subsequent costume design (Brown, 2011, p. 193). The 80’s action heroine nevertheless presented what Yvonne Tasker calls *musculinity* referring to female characters who embody the physical and masculine energy of the male action hero and are still undoubtedly female. Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991) are good examples of the masculine action heroine and their getup is very similar to the male action hero’s, a simple t-shirt and cargo pants (Tasker, 1993, p. 3), (O’Day, 2004, p. 203).

The 90’s and 2000’s featured an action heroine that embodied both the physical strength and resourcefulness of the action hero and the sexualized appeal of the traditional passive female character. She challenges the stereotypical passive female character while also embodying her. The getup of this newer action heroine is often sexy and revealing, and justified within the narrative as a ruse to distract male opponents who apparently can’t resist looking at beautiful and sexualized women. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Barb Wire* (1996) both feature curvaceous heroines for example where the filmmakers focus heavily on their bodies and how they use it to their advantage. The patriarchal tradition of objectifying female characters is deliberately used by these action heroines to conquer their male opponents. Films featuring action heroines and its star were repeatedly objectified in media coverage with pictures of the star astride a motorcycle regardless of the vehicle’s relevance to the film. Action heroines on motorcycles is a specific visual convention of the genre. Traditionally, the motorcycle represents freedom and mobility but “it is also an obvious phallic symbol” that represents power, privilege and individuality (Brown, 2011, p. 15). The motorcycle is used as a symbolic indication of the action heroine’s active role, as opposed to the traditional passive role, and her independence and strength but it is also a form of fetishization. It equates the action heroine with the vehicle as an object available to the male consumer.

It is clear that the action heroine transcends the traditionally passive female character without completely escaping the cultural and patriarchal ideas on female representation. The action and adventure genre is considered a male-oriented and masculine genre and most attempts to feminize it result in a “beautiful, glamorous and sexualized” action heroine (Brown, 2011, p. 11). The masculine 80’s heroines are perhaps the most famous examples of a successful action heroine that truly transcend the traditional female role and they were also commercially successful. Stand-alone action heroine film releases from the 90’s and 2000’s “struggled to achieve blockbuster notoriety” while serialized formats achieved “much more critical and commercial success” (2011, pp. 12-13). Action heroine films released from the late 2000’s and on are predominantly a part of a serialized franchise, or the heroine is a part of a team and not necessarily featured in standalone films. *The Avengers* and *X-men* (multiple films from 2000-2019) are good examples of these franchises where male heroes have been featured in individual films while the female heroines have not, until recently. The newest superhero serial film franchise *The Justice League* (2017) has already released individual films featuring the superheroes, including *Wonder Woman* (2017) which was “the first female lead superhero movie since ... 2005” (Brown, 2016, p. 51). These new action heroines are not objectified as much, though they still cannot escape the tradition entirely, predicting a more gender-neutral approach within the genre in the future.

## Superhero

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have become the new golden age for superheroes. Several superhero films were released in the 1940’s, and the late 70’s and 80’s proved a potential blockbuster success for the genre. Throughout film history specific genres have become popular in response to a specific time period, and superhero films appear to have flourished in “the traumatized post-9/11 climate” (Brown, 2016, p. 2). The superhero genre typically features distinct good and bad characters, where the good always defeats the bad which provides a comforting fantasy for a melancholy nation temporarily defeated by terrorists. Technological advances in digital special effects is also an influential factor in that it enables filmmakers of live action superhero films to create fantastical characters that are recognizable and believable. The ceaseless making of new superhero films has created a substantial enough foundation for them to be considered a specific genre which has “clear narrative conventions, formulaic situations and recognizable character types” (2016, p. 3). At its simplest the superhero film features a super-powered character that battles villains and

protects the innocent bystanders. The superhero is a fantasy where ordinary people gain superpowers and save the world (or America).

Superhero films are primarily based on comic book heroes which have traditionally featured a sexualized and exaggerated female body. This tradition has accompanied the genre between mediums as superheroines embody “a standardized sexualization of women in the media” (Brown, 2016, p. 11). Their physique is generally accentuated with form fitting costumes which overshadows their powers or abilities. Like the action heroine, the superheroine utilizes her sexuality to fight dumbstruck male opponents, and their sexuality is also emphasized as their power while simultaneously used to objectify them. The superhero genre maintains traditional patriarchal ideas on femininity and masculinity, and exaggerates it with hypermasculine superheroes and hypersexual superheroines who undoubtedly embody the traditional gender ideals. A new emphasis on standalone superheroine films sparks hope that the genre “is perhaps slowly moving towards a more challenging message about gender issues and a more egalitarian approach to superheroics” (2016, p. 51).

## Analysis

The character this analysis focuses on, the Black Widow or Natasha Romanoff, is initially introduced as a supporting character in *Iron Man 2* (2010). Her role in *The Avengers* (2012) is much bigger a part of the team, the Avengers. She is the team’s only original female superheroine and one of two original members that have not yet received an individual film. The film is the culmination to phase one in the franchise and depicts the process of how the team the Avengers was formed. A majority of the characters have already been introduced and the goal of uniting them in a team of people with exceptional skills is an already established idea. When Loki, an alien god who represents the antagonist and antipathetic character in the film, invades earth with his alien army the team assembly is set into motion. Natasha is the only female member of the team as opposed to five male characters which is why she was chosen for this analysis. She represents her entire gender and the aim of this analysis is to determine if and how she manages to engage viewers in a film that features multiple characters. To determine how engaging the character is and how the engagement is achieved I use Smith’s structure of sympathy. I conclude that section with a discussion on the sympathetic identification and its relation to the various cognitive responses discussed in the first chapter. Secondly, I consider how the character represents the action heroine and



superheroine based on the sympathetic and cognitive identification the structure of sympathy analysis produced. I focus on how she as an action heroine transcends the confines of the passive female character action and adventure films have historically depicted, and also how she is restrained with objectification and eroticization.

## Structure of Sympathy

The film is told in the classical narration style, it is goal driven and utilizes omniscient narration. The omniscient narration form and the multiple character attachment disrupt immersed character identification and the restricted narration is generally considered more suitable to achieve successful identification. There are various strategies used for each step of the structure of sympathy that this narration style also disrupts which is why the identification is very dependent on establishing connections between major characters. Story construction is also an important component of cognitive viewing and it is diminished with almost all narrative components visible to viewers resulting in less cognitive load on viewers, but which could also impact their interest. The aim of this part of the analysis is to determine which techniques and strategies are used to motivate character identification with the character Natasha Romanoff by focusing on each step separately.

## Recognition

There are a lot of factors that influence how the character is initially recognized. She is portrayed by Scarlett Johansson whom many viewers will immediately recognize. Devoted viewers and fans would have pre-existing ideas based on her role in *Iron Man 2* (2010), the trailer for the film and the comics the films and characters are based on. The following analysis is however focused on how Natasha Romanoff is introduced and made recognizable to viewers in *The Avengers* (2012). Before discussing how the pre-existing ideas might affect recognition, I want to analyze which traits are visible or audible in her first scene, and what they suggest to viewers not yet familiar with the character.

The first shot of the scene is of a train riding by where perceptive viewers might notice signs in Russian which establishes a location, Russia. The camera slowly goes from that shot into a run-down and dingy warehouse where Natasha is revealed tied to a chair and surrounded by 4 male characters. Natasha stands out due to sitting close to a large crystal

chandelier that is the only visible source of light. The first identifiable physical traits are her dark red hair, sexy little black dress and red lipstick. A close-up of her body reveals a hole in her tights and a bloodied knee. The camera returns repeatedly to her, with close-ups of her body, face, and selected body parts: a whole in her tights showing her bloody knee, and her toes struggling to touch the floor. Natasha clearly stands out and draws viewers' attention though the other characters can be individuated. The lighting and POV imply that she is a more important character than the other four. A shot of a stack of boxes filled with guns, paintings and a mirror where the characters are visible and especially her, suggest that these men surrounding her are dangerous. The whole setting suggests that she is a damsel in distress. Also, because this is not the film's opening which has "a special function in our experience of narrative, because we base our viewing strategies and expectations on the information we receive at the beginning of a text" (Smith, 1995, p. 118) the viewer has already modeled his expectations on what the opening scene signified. It introduces several characters and establishes the film as an action film, among other things. Viewers have therefore already matched the film to their schema to a masculine genre where female characters often require help from a male protagonist, or aside from gender that most characters would require help when tied to a chair. The interpretation is ratified by close-ups of her facial expressions; she is sweaty and her expressions suggests that she is anxious, especially when another character attempts to frighten her by leaning the chair back over a gaping hole in the floor and by brutally pinching her face. A close-up of her toes struggling to touch the floor imply her anxiety over the situation. During these visible cues an older male character has been interrogating her in Russian which she also replies in, suggesting that she is Russian. A sentence reveals her alias and implies a background; "the famous Black Widow and she turns out to be simply another pretty face" (*The Avengers*, 12:19-12:27).

The initial recognition assigns her recognizable physical traits (red hair, red lipstick, tight black dress), nationality (Russian) and a name or alias (Black Widow). Though the setup situates her as a damsel in distress, her replies during the interrogation and minor cues of anxiety suggest she might not be all that distressed. The interrogation is interrupted by one of the male character's phone ringing and the caller asks for her, threatening to blow up the place if they refuse. Her exchange on the phone transforms her visible emotional state and the dialogue erases any notion viewers might have had of her as a damsel in distress. The caller is shown to be agent Coulson, a character introduced in the opening scene, which establishes a connection between her and the characters in the opening scene. Their conversation reveals

that she was in fact playing a part in order to get information from her captors. A close-up of her face shows no evidence of anxiety or distress, but rather annoyance at the interruption along with the annoyed tone of her voice. When agent Coulson mentions that “Barton’s been compromised” (*The Avengers*, 13:35-13:37) her expression hardens and she looks determined and focused. She puts the phone down, fights and conquers her captors. She is here established as a very competent and skilled fighter upending the initial impression entirely. She continues the phone conversation with Coulson when she has defeated her captors and a shot of him reveals a computer screen playing a video of her fighting alongside Barton where her name and alias is visible; Natasha Romanoff and Black Widow. The last emotion visible on her face is fear in reaction to an order to get the big guy suggesting that despite her excellent fighting skills she is capable of fear.

Physical recognition and re-identification of the character is pretty straightforward. Her red hair is easily identifiable, her pouty lips and shapely body confirm the re-identification. Viewers are able to add fighting skills, real name and confidence to their character construction during her first scene and these traits are re-established throughout the film. She has essentially fulfilled all aspects of the person schema; she is clearly human, she can perceive her surroundings, her actions are intentional, she displays emotions and the goals to save Barton and get the big guy are established. The change in the character’s behavior during this first scene does however create an almost double recognition where she is initially recognized as a damsel in distress, and then as an action heroine. There are some clues that she might not be that distressed; she answers the interrogation with her own questions and depicts minimal anxiety though his comment on her being the famous Black Widow also suggest that she might not be the typical helpless damsel but still distressed. This kind of misleading recognition is difficult to achieve when the trailer, previous installments in the franchise, comics on the same subject and even the film title have already informed viewers of her role in the film but for a completely unfamiliar viewer it might work. The double recognition does however influence subsequent scenes in that viewers can never be sure if the emotions she depicts are authentic or not, the character’s acting is a part of the character construction.

## Alignment

The alignment strategies used for various characters in the film are pretty straightforward; the POV structure, facial expressions and posture and dialogue. There are however multiple protagonists which complicate both attachment and subjective access, especially in scenes that include many characters. The narration is mostly omniscient and attached to characters while they talk, fight or look at information the spectator also needs access to. In scenes that include many characters the focus is often more on the male characters than on Natasha mostly because they talk more than she does. Overall, the narrative attaches to Natasha when she is talking or fighting. The POV structure is attached to her in one-on-one conversations or when she is the only major character present. The POV structure is often shown with the back of the person visible, in this film however there is a shot of a character to establish whose POV it is and the reaction shot situates the character and viewers as the camera, the characters are not in the frame. The longest disparity is Natasha's first scene where she is often in the forefront of the reaction shot. The narrative is primarily attached to her during her first scene; the camera repeatedly returns to her, shows her POV, reaction, close-ups of body parts and face, and follows her movement when she eventually moves. Her POV is shown both as the camera in her situation and with the back of her head in the forefront of the frame. There are subsequent close-ups of her reaction to the interrogation and abuse. The other character's point of view in looking at her are fewer and primarily bound to the old male character. In this first scene, her facial expressions imply certain traits; her skeptical eyebrow raise along with the dialogue imply her self-confidence and the hardening of her face when hearing that "Barton's been compromised" suggests loyalty (*The Avengers*, 13:35-13:37). Facial expressions can efficiently convey a character's emotional state and these shots of her facial expressions align viewers with Natasha with enabling them to recognize her emotions and associating them with previous events in the film. The emotions visible on her face (mild annoyance, determination and almost anger) indicate a relationship between Natasha and Barton and a shot of her fighting alongside Barton establishes this relationship, though its nature is still unclear. A pattern of alignment has been created in which Natasha's interest in saving Barton aligns with viewers interest in discovering the nature of their relationship.

The films within the Avengers franchise, and especially the ensemble films, have a tendency to pair their characters together to simplify narrative attachment to the multiple

characters. This seems to be a variation of the action buddy film where two unlikely characters unite to conquer their enemies. The characters Natasha is paired up with are not typical for the buddy action film tendency, but other pairings in the film are (mainly Captain America and Iron Man), and it is interesting to consider how she is almost never left alone as opposed to the male character which I will discuss in next chapter on how she embodies the action heroine. The first scene establishes a relationship with agent Barton, and the second scene pairs her up with Bruce Banner or Hulk. The scene is primarily a dialogue between her and Banner, and mostly consists of POV shots and reaction shots of the two characters. She is re-identifiable because of her red hair but her clothing is very different and she is wearing a lot less make-up than in her first scene. The long skirt and shawl are both in style at the location (India), and are also clothing often associated to a caring person; a mother or grandmother. She appears relaxed and calm which is revealed to be a façade when she quickly draws a gun on Banner at his sudden angry outburst. In her previous scene she shows fear at instructions to go get Hulk, and that fear is re-established here. This fear is more related to constructing his character but it also foreshadows a later scene in which this fear is realized. Her sudden movement might provoke a startle response from the viewer, the shift from calm to active is very sudden which is a prime setting for startling the viewer. Her behavior towards Banner establishes certain aspects of her character, especially in comparison with her behavior in the first scene. She has different and methodological approaches to different characters that indicate her adaptability to different situations. The differences in her behavior and clothing establish certain expectations for viewers in that they simultaneously cannot know what to expect from the character while they also expect her to surprise them. Furthermore, because these scenes are consecutive viewers have been aligned with her for some time and have plenty of material to cognitively construct her character with. She is revealed to be adaptable, adept, confident and loyal. The unknown nature of her relationship with Barton and her nationality give her character a sense of mystery. Additionally, in her dialogue with Banner she says that she started her “career” young which creates a framework for further stereotypical assumptions based on pre-existing ideas on female Russian spies. Viewers also model their expectations based on their existing ideas on similar characters.

In her third scene the narrative is initially spatially attached to her and she is easily re-identified by her red hair. Her posture resembles an official army pose and her get-up somewhat a typical action heroine; tight clothes, leather jacket, gun strapped to thigh and heels. This is her typical posture, as subsequent scenes reveal. The camera follows her to meet

up with two other major characters (Captain America and Banner) at which point it attaches to all three during their conversation and follows them as they walk around the setting. The change in her demeanor in the previous scenes suggested a hardness in her character which is evident in this scene. She maintains her firm, official demeanor in her conversation with Captain America while also joking a little and her posture remains the same throughout. Her whole demeanor become slightly more aware when they reach Banner, again re-establishing the initial fear of him. Viewers were primarily aligned with her during her first two scenes which shifts more to the other characters in this scene. The spatial attachment moves away from her and to them as they engage in a more private conversation. She stays in the background until finally suggesting they go inside as “it’s going to get a little harder to breathe” (*The Avengers*, 31:31-:31:33). The shift from her to the other characters and her standing statue like in the background degrades her in a way to a supporting character. Her individual introductory scene established her as a major character, viewers have constructed a simple character idea and this slight degradation might frustrate some viewers who expect her to be a prominent and participating character. The versatility implied by the first two scenes is diminished in this scene with her hard, professional appearance. Though, after consideration, her suppressed attitude might be construed as adapting to this environment while it is also an example of the passive female characters typical for the action and adventure genre. Especially in light of how the degradation comes after the appearance of an anticipated character (Captain America) who has featured in a standalone film, and also happens to be male. The following scenes maintain this shift, she is reduced to a supporting character in assisting Captain America and the arriving Iron Man and Thor in capturing Loki. Though she has been assigned a specific and individual goal that is linked to the major goal of stopping and defeating Loki, the narrative focus is on the other characters during the scenes leading up to the capture, the capture itself and the flight back. She is shown looking at Barton on a computer screen, she flies the airplane transporting other characters to capture Loki, even participates a little by shooting at him, and gives advice to other characters. All in all, an epitome of an individuated supporting character, her presence is convenient but not really necessary.

The next scene that primarily aligns viewers with Natasha is her interrogation of Loki which features them in a one-on-one conversation. The dialogue resolves some of the mysteriousness surrounding her character; how a Russian spy wound up working for an American corporation and the nature of her and Barton’s relationship. Her questions regarding

Barton lead to a short but very informative and direct dialogue that reveals she worked as what can be understood as a hitman for which Barton was supposed to kill her but captured her instead. She also explains that she is working for Shield to rid herself of her past sins: “I’ve got red in my ledger, I’d like to wipe it out” (*The Avengers*, 1:02:39-1:02:42). Loki revels his knowledge on what exactly these past sins are to which she has an emotional reaction shown with a close-up of her face. She starts shaking, breathing faster and tears form in her eyes, he continues ranting and threatens using Barton against her at which she turns away in apparent horror at his words. At his comment “you brought the monster” (*The Avengers*, 1:04:03-1:04:05) a shot of her back shows her in a defeated posture that changes suddenly at his words. She straightens up and viewers realize, at the same time Loki does, that she was acting as the emotional friend to manipulate him into revealing his intentions. Viewers expect her versatility to adapt to any situation, but in this scene, she might have deceived them as well the other character. An emotional reaction from a female character is also expected based on pre-existing knowledge in which female characters are often depicted as emotional creatures. While simultaneously it is unexpected from this character who has in previous scenes moderated her emotional reactions (fear of Hulk, anger at Barton’s capture). This is a prime example of how effective performance can be in achieving alignment. The close-up of her emotional facial expression can motivate affective mimicry, that is simulating the character’s emotions, structured with Loki’s ranting and the pleasure he takes in upsetting her. The reaction is somewhat out of character but the scene structure and the viewers memory matching combined with the performance successfully creates an illusion in which viewers accept her reaction despite possibly expecting another. The problem with the sudden change in her mood is that it can prompt detached viewing, because it is surprising. Even though viewers expect her to adapt to any situation her performance engages them on false pretenses. This is perhaps not a huge problem in this typical action film that favors spectacle over character engagement, which I will discuss further at the end of the sympathetic analysis, but it can have minor effects on the likeability of her character in light of the expectations based on pre-existing knowledge. Grodal’s PECMA flow, that explains viewers cognitive effort during film watching, is a repetitive process which means viewers are consistently applying the new audiovisual information to pre-existing memory. Her versatile performances increase the cognitive work load and the issue is that there might not be enough scenes during the film for viewers to construct a specific schema on Natasha to refer to. That is also why this particular problem applies only to this film as a standalone but not to the whole franchise.

The focus is primarily on selected male characters in the following scene in which the superheroes assemble in a lab with occasional comments from Natasha where she supports Shield. Here her loyalty can be conveyed differently in light of her conversation with Loki where she revealed that her devotion to Barton and the company is in her own interest, to erase her criminal record. A sudden explosion surprises the characters but not viewers because the omniscient narration attached itself to Barton when he blew up one of the engines. This begins a scene of fighting where Natasha has a bigger role than in the capture of Loki. The explosion casts the characters into different locations pairing Natasha with Banner who is changing into Hulk. This confrontation has been repeatedly foreshadowed with Natasha's fear and cautiousness around Banner. It has likely more to do with creating suspense for his character but it is also interesting that she, the only major female character, embodies the fear of his transformation. She in many ways transcends action and adventure's typical passive female character but narrative functions like this establish her as a member of the weaker sex, and the emotion is arguably out of character. It suggests that she is the only one capable of feeling real fear because she is a female. Hulk chases Natasha through confined spaces within the ship and viewers are primarily aligned with her, which emphasizes her fear. A sequence of their encounter shows her hiding and out of breath, sneaking around in the dark with creepy sounds heard in the background. This is a prime set-up for arousing the startling effect and is similar to what is done in horror movies. The startle is anticipated but nonetheless successful in startling viewers, which it does in this scene. The startle is often mirrored by the character but a minimally startled Natasha shoots at a pipeline to confuse the Hulk. Hulk is subsequently distracted by Thor and the encounter is concluded with a close-up shot that shows her in an unnerved and shaken state. Unlike the close-up of her emotional reaction in the interrogation scene this is real and identifiably so because she is alone. If the false emotional reaction aggravated any viewers this one might in turn redeem her. It is also significant to note that she is the only major character that displays a relatively strong emotional reaction other than anger. That consolidates the expectation that a female character typically shows emotional reactions to certain events despite that reaction being out of character.

The scene is not over and the shot is continued in the next sequence where she still sits unnerved by her previous fight. Nick Fury announces where Barton is headed through the intercom to which Natasha responds and goes searching for him. The emotional reaction to her encounter with Hulk marks a common narrative function, the hero's "fall from greatness"



(Barry, 2009, p. 216). This sets up the possibility of resurgence which makes her more relatable. Perfection and uninterrupted success are realistically implausible and difficult to relate with. Her fall makes her more relatable. Her impending encounter with Barton is her opportunity for resurgence as it enables her to complete her individual goal. Which she does; she finds him, fights him and defeats him. The first two scenes featuring Natasha established the two functions that propel her narrative; the goal to save Barton and the fear of facing Banner's other personality, Hulk. With both functions realized her purpose is somewhat completed. Another section within this fighting scene showed Loki killing agent Coulson, a character Natasha knows and likes, which functions as an incentive for a personal desire to defeat Loki. This incentive also unites her and the other major characters in seeking to fulfill the same goal. This goal is established in her next scene in a one-on-one conversation with Barton where he is surprised at her determination to stop Loki at which she refers to wiping out her past sins, but her slightly flustered reaction suggest that Loki's rant might have hit a weak spot after all despite the implication that it did not. The long and final fighting scene routinely aligns the narrative to Natasha to afford viewers multiple aspects of the overall battle, but it is primarily a spatio-temporal attachment and with little dialogue mostly used for comic relief or battle planning it allows for little subjective access.

The discussion above on various scenes reveals how the film aligns viewers with this particular character. The POV structure is used to an extent as a marker of alignment, though repeated shots of her face and body are also used to distinguish her as a major character. Dialogue and facial expressions are the primary means of implementing subjective access. She is also decisively attached to two male characters for goal-setting and narrative relevance as it both creates distinct and personally dangerous situations, and ties her goal to the film's overall goal. Viewers come to expect different versions of her character because of her demonstrated adaptability to different situations and in dealing with different characters. Her first two scenes also establish her as a major character and align viewers primarily with her. The decrease in alignment and screen time during scenes with multiple major characters can frustrate some viewers because she has been made intriguing and has established an individual goal. Because she repeatedly masquerades as a delicate female and then emerges as a strong fighter, the decrease in alignment coupled with her versatile nature can prompt detachment from the character. Viewers have specific anticipations based on their memory matching and deviation from them can either motivate amazed engagement or detachment because it is too cognitively interfering. The specific expectations regarding female action

characters and heroines, which among others regulate viewers' anticipations, will be discussed in the last analysis section.

## Allegiance

Individual character allegiance is more difficult to achieve in a film that features multiple major characters and a principally omniscient narration. This film utilizes the general techniques I discussed in my chapter on the theory; iconography, music, linguistic techniques and star personae. These techniques are however sparsely used for individual characters and rather devoted to boost action spectacles and the united team. There are other techniques used to encourage allegiance; namely her connection to other characters, interaction with the antagonist and character action. The thematic element of pairing I mentioned in the previous section plays a large role in allegiance. This pairing is essential in light of how some characters have already been introduced with individual films. When viewers evaluate a character's morals, they compare characters. Therefore, comparing her character to previously introduced characters can either strengthen or weaken her moral evaluation. She is, however, primarily paired with characters introduced in this film. The connection established between Coulson, already introduced as a Shield agent, and Natasha in her first scene acts as a sort of marker of allegiance. That is, an indicator for viewers that this character is one of "the good guys" and subsequently a character worth rooting for. The alignment during this first scene is also influential in that she is favored by the camera, shown from many different angles and with close-ups which marks her as the main character in that scene. Combined with her precarious situation as a constrained captive, viewers are set-up in a position to root for her to escape and their assumed allegiance is verified by connecting her to Coulson.

By way of Coulson, a connection with Barton is established. While her pairing with Banner juxtaposes her goodness with his alter ego Hulk and creates an opportunity for a difficult encounter, its purpose is to lay a groundwork for a romantic relationship in later films. Her pairing with Barton is however vital for both characters for their moral evaluation as their good side is dependent on each other; he saved her from a life of killing and she saves him from Loki's mind control. Considering the tendency of action and adventure films to make female characters morally desirable (or simply desirable) by linking them to male characters, Barton's belief in her potential for redemption makes her morally desirable because he is a male character. He is also simply another character within the fictional world

who is, briefly but surely, established as normally a good character that assumedly knows her better than viewers and his certification of her moral status is therefore beneficial. Along with the minimal information on her past, and the cognitive inferences viewers make based on that information, his confidence in her at her lowest point speaks highly of her. Their moral evaluation is fairly dependent on their pairing, especially in regards to him as he would likely be expendable without her determination to save him. The cues for the positive moral reaction to their relationship lie in her expressive reaction to Coulson's news that Barton's been compromised, a shot of her looking at a computer screen depicting a viral search for him and when she reveals the nature of their relationship to Loki. These cues also set-up a desired and feared eventual encounter which fulfills a goal and delivers a completion of their development from regular agents to the Avengers, a team determined to save the world regardless of their own desires. The determination to stop Loki makes her moral status clearer.

The Manichean moral structure of the clear distinction between good and evil is interesting in regards to this franchise, film and character. The film seemingly embodies a clear distinction between good and evil. It sets-up a very clear and evil antagonist in Loki who seeks to conquer Earth with the help of an alien race. While Loki is easily recognizable and even aligned with, the alien race is presented as a united evil force and mostly indistinguishable, stick figures not meant to be individuated. Loki's association with them bolsters Loki's immorality. In contrast with his clear evil the Avengers embody the good and this is a vital component of encouraging allegiance in that there must be an antipathetic character for the intended protagonist to be sympathetic (Smith, 1995, p. 89). All of the major characters do however depict some immoral values, they are not as completely good as the Manichean structure requires which is why the film overall is more along the lines of the classical moral structure. The distinction within characters is very evident in Banner's case; he has two personalities with distinguishable physical traits despite sharing the same body, and in Barton's case he is corrupted by Loki. What is then interesting is that Natasha is paired up with those two characters who embody both good and evil in this particular film. Natasha is presently in the film a good character who has an evil past and embodies the clear distinction in how she moves from being completely evil and indifferent to completely good and law-abiding, a development completed in the film. Her pairing with these particular and duplex characters juxtaposes her own development with theirs, and creates a situation for moral evaluation in her helpfulness, empathy and loyalty to those characters. The clear distinction between Banner and Barton's good and evil side makes Natasha the embodiment

of good in comparison. She is determined to save her friend and bravely faces difficult opponents in order to achieve her goal. She does not waver which is most prominently depicted when she is shaken and unnerved from her encounter with Hulk and still manages to pick herself up and confront the mind-controlled Barton. This strength is repeatedly demonstrated with displaying her as scared or in trouble and adeptly emerging victorious which can encourage allegiance. This is also a narrative tradition within the genre, action and adventure, that female characters use their appearance (beautiful, sexualized and innocent damsels in distress) to their advantage which is discussed further in the last analysis section. Additionally, even though Barton and Banner are in themselves major characters their pairing with Natasha is used to an extent to present her as morally positive, to situate her as the opposite to their evil side, similar to how some characters only exist within a film to set-up a moral evaluation of a major character. Coulson's death also serves that purpose, despite preceding the role of a mere moral evaluation set-up character, because his death completes her evil to good transformation.

The distinction between good and evil within her character is interestingly tied in with her nationality when she says to Loki "I'm Russian, or I was" (*The Avengers*, 1:02:30-1:02:32), implying that she was evil and Russian, and she is now good and not Russian. Action and adventure films have traditionally featured a variety of stereotypical nationalities to add to the thrill and Russian characters in Hollywood films have typically been villains, often with exaggerated accents and Aryan traits (Holmlund, 2004), (Ginneken, 2007). With the assumedly negative association with Russians, her disavowal is designed to make her morally desirable which might affect viewers differently depending on their culture or nationality. The film is largely aimed at the masses American audiences are and their beliefs are still under influences from the Cold War, where being Russian certainly meant being the enemy. Natasha is likely meant to make the team multicultural but because she renounces her nationality it maintains a typical action and adventure film theme where Americans are the only capable saviors in a world filled with other nationalities. Aside from that minor disdain Russians are shown, the film sets-up clear contrasting representatives of good and evil in making the ultimate battle between humans and aliens, who are difficult to individuate and therefore unrecognizable as identifiable characters.

There are several general techniques used to indicate a character's moral status in films such as iconography, music, linguistic techniques and character action. These techniques are used sparsely on individual characters, including Natasha. Linguistic

techniques are used to signify a stereotypical connection between her specific skillset and nationality. The first scene uses iconography and culturally constructed ideas on Russians and the genre action and adventure to indicate her moral status. The men surrounding her in the first scene are clearly depicted as immoral; they have her restrained and are tormenting her and the setting (an abandoned warehouse) indicates they want to hide their business because it is illegal. There is also an obvious difference in lighting in that she is lit up while they mostly remain in the shadow which can be construed as light/good vs. dark/evil. Her moral status is thus indicated in juxtaposing her with them. Technical use of music to exclusively indicate Natasha's moral status is overall minuscule and inconsequential. The film relies mostly on a specifically created film score which does not supplement Natasha's individual and one-on-one scenes until she interrogates Loki. The song, Red Ledger (Silvestri, 2012), that supplements the scene is mysterious and somber like Natasha. Unfortunately, it is almost inaudible and if the music helps at all with moral evaluation it is entirely subconsciously so.

Character action is reasonably the most influential element in the moral evaluation of Natasha. Her confidence in her own skills is what drives her narrative, she is brave and confident enough to join superhuman characters to face off with an alien god despite being merely a human. Throughout the film her goal-driven decisions repeatedly lead her into hostile situations, and the scenes featuring multiple major characters I have discussed the focus is more on the superhuman characters. The final battle scene finally depicts Natasha alongside the superhumans fighting the evil alien race as equally capable of fighting. Her adaptability is utilized when she jumps aboard an alien ship and flies it to her destination. This is a spectacle driven event but she is awarded a vital role, to close the portal allowing the aliens access across space. The cross-cutting between the major characters and presenting the alien race as a stick figures aligns viewers with all major characters, persuades viewers to pledge allegiance to those characters and especially Natasha who has the power to end the battle. Viewers rank characters according to who they like or find least objectionable and this is perhaps the only time in the film Natasha might be the most popular. Though in terms of subjective access viewers are not specifically aligned with Natasha she is at this point relatively individually successful in motivating allegiance. The significance of character action for motivating allegiance with her character is very much dependent on her gender. Her fighting skills are what distinguish her as an action heroine rather than the passive female character historically typical for the genre action and adventure. Her skills are used to motivate allegiance in how she repeatedly surprises other characters (and sometimes viewers)

with her ability to adapt to different situations and masquerade as a helpless woman. The element of surprise lies primarily in how she challenges stereotypical assumptions on female characters. This narratively justifies the genre's tendency to have action heroines utilize their femininity to their advantage, it is signified as her most advantageous power, and it is an example of the continued female cinematic objectification I discussed in the chapter on action heroines. The idea of action and adventure being a masculine genre is still evident in how the camera presents male and female characters differently. Also, disrupting stereotypical assumptions and how that might either empower alignment and allegiance or prompt detachment is certainly due to her gender. A more detailed discussion on these elements in regards to typical action heroines and feminist film theory is in the last analysis section.

Allegiance is to some extent overall dependent on gender. She is the only major female character. Assuming that female viewers tend to identify with female characters rather than male characters, she is the only female character filmmakers have devoted sufficient alignment strategies to for conceivable identification. The maintained objectification can therefore create problems. Objectifying POV shots might bother female viewers who have grown tired of this patriarchal custom. Natasha's POV is frequently utilized for alignment and narrative progress but there are several objectifying POV shots of her that situate the viewers as male characters looking at her or simply the camera. The most noteworthy shots are the first shots of her tied to a chair in her first scene where close-ups of chosen body-parts, the lighting and posture accentuate her femininity. These shots of course insinuate her falsely precarious situation and might be intended to do exactly that, as reference to the traditional style of displaying female characters which is an example of how this tradition is narratively justified. Her attire is furthermore an example of the difference in how male characters and female characters are displayed in film. The big characters have specifically designed uniforms whereas she has a standard black uniform, that coincidentally accentuates her bosom, and heels which I will discuss in detail in the last analysis section.

In conclusion it seems that the most influencing component in making her morally desirable to viewers is her association with other morally desirable characters, being part of the team and being the only major female character. The ultimate goal for the film is to encourage allegiance to the team the Avengers and individual allegiances lay the foundation. The general techniques used to encourage allegiance are employed in a momentous shot of the Avengers gathered together for the first time in the midst of a life-threatening situation supplemented by the Avengers theme (Silvestri, 2012). that It marks the films goal

completion and motivates allegiance with supplementing theme music and each character sporting their iconic weapon or attire (*The Avengers*, 1:47:34-1:47:44). Individual allegiance is variably encouraged as some major characters have been featured in individual films while others have had sparse opportunities within this film. That is why allegiance with Natasha is dependent on her connection to already established morally desirable characters. A film like this, with multiple character attachments, does not really encourage individual allegiance. Viewers do not need to pick a favorite character because the characters are ultimately united in completing the same major goal. The film is largely goal driven towards establishing the team and encourages viewers to give allegiance to them as a united front, not individuals. The team in its entirety serves as the moral center for viewers to model their expectations on and that diminishes the need for individual identification. It is however also difficult to determine how each viewer experiences the film and because it is a part of a larger fictional film series viewers are still likely to pick a favorite. The biggest recommendation Natasha has for a change at being ranked higher than other characters is being the only major female character.

## Discussion

This careful analysis of one character in a film that features multiple major characters revealed that this film is largely driven by goals and sensational action, that often happens to be character action. The sensation centered narrative simultaneously depends on the characters to propel it while also overshadowing them which is typical for action and adventure films. There are therefore two modes of engaging with this film; spectacle engagement and character engagement. It is not necessary to identify with the characters to understand or experience the film, largely because the narration is omniscient. The film is essentially built around placing characters in situations that lead to visually spectacular cinematography and the characters are sometimes themselves the spectacle, flying and using technology far beyond real capacity. As interdependent modes of engagement, spectacles and characters function well together. This does however lead to monotonously constructed characters, who will develop throughout a narrative franchise but come across as almost one-dimensional characters in this single film. Viewers are not enough information on each character for immersed identification which Smith considers a requirement. Compressed and simple traits are plainly established to maximize allegiance to each character as a foundation for allegiance to the whole team. As a result, the characters exemplify obviously identifiable physical traits, Natasha's red hair for example, and straightforward mental traits established

through minimal dialogue and active fighting (loyalty, honor and bravery for example). Natasha is introduced as a mysterious Russian and active female character who repeatedly uses her femininity and fighting skills to overpower her opponents. A complicated and intricate character substance is hinted at with statements relating to her past followed by emotional reactions but not explored deeper in this film because it is released as part of a narrative franchise. Character development is postponed to achieve this particular film's overall goal of uniting spectacular characters and demonstrating their abilities with visual spectacles.

The film furthermore inspires detached viewing with repeated bail-out mechanism implementation; comic relief, startling sensations and scares which is again typical for action films. The film is filled with one-liners delivered by various characters which simultaneously releases viewers from their film engagement and makes the film and characters likeable. The repeated comic relief can also serve as an indicator of the character's coping mechanism, as in coping with their impending doom and masking their fear with humor. Natasha makes two comments in the final battle scenes that serve as a comic relief for viewers within the dialogue context and motivational comments for her following action; "This is just like Budapest all over again" (*The Avengers*, 1:44:17-1:44:20), "Yeah, it's going to be fun" (*The Avengers*, 1:51:17-1:51:19). The sensational action offers several startling shots which can typically be expected in an action and adventure film, and the scene with Hulk and Natasha is an example of a horror related scene in an action film which is also not entirely unexpected. Considered as a standalone film the goal driven agenda works because of the monotonous, entertaining characters and the variably sensational action almost every scene builds up to. Viewers can become as immersed in the major goal fulfillment, regardless of individual character attachment, and the maintained action as much as they can identify with individual characters. Any disappointment with character development can be sated with additional installments. Because of the omniscient narration characters are more equal as opposed to thoroughly ranked and viewers can readily identify with whomever the narration is attached to. The characters also harmonize well together in their dependency on each other. It creates opportunities for alignment and moral evaluation. The goal of forming the Avengers to defeat Loki is enough to drive viewers interest, and though it diminishes character impact the anticipation of further installments should appease viewers. The simplicity of the characters and spectacle driven narrative is not entirely overwhelming which is also why viewers have cognitive capacity to enjoy the film without being completely engaged. Overall, with their



readily comprehensible character traits and humor the characters are entertaining enough to achieve their role as mediums for viewers to experience the narrative and even to encourage character engagement over spectacle engagement. The characters give meaning to the narrative but are not in themselves too important.

## The Black Widow

The simplified character construction discussed above relies heavily on viewers cognitive assumptions when matching the audiovisual information to their memory which is why Natasha's gender might be her most advantageous trait in inspiring allegiance. The first step in the structure of sympathy is dependent on identifying physical traits to establish a character as a human and to re-identify and recognize the character throughout the film. As discussed before, Natasha's most prominent physical trait is her red hair but her feminine figure is repeatedly accentuated and is established as a recognizable physical trait. While this is helpful for re-identification it is also an example of the long-standing film tradition of objectifying female characters. The discussion in this chapter considers how the character Natasha Romanoff exemplifies the action- and superheroine, a female character form that transcends patriarchal film traditions while simultaneously embodying them. To determine this, the information gathered in the sympathetic character analysis is used with additional references from other films within the franchise.

Action and adventure films imply an audiovisual sensational action experience and the female body was early on made part of the spectacle. The genre was considered masculine and aimed at male viewers who got to experience an objectified and sexualized passive female character. Feminist film theorists criticized this objectification decades ago and yet it is still a noticeable method used in numerous films, and especially action and adventure films. The action heroine was similarly created decades ago and at one point had the potential to alter female character tradition; the 80's action heroine truly transcended the patriarchal tradition to the point where feminist film theorists described them as "pseudo males' or as being not 'really' women" (Hills, 1999, p. 38). The 90's action heroine was however a combination of the objectified female character and active and strong action heroine. The contemporary superheroine likewise unites the two variations and is somewhat bound by the fetishized female characters presented in the comics superhero films are primarily based on. Natasha Romanoff embodies this merged female character who is simultaneously objectified,

sexualized and made desirable as well as a capable, confident and strong heroine. There are several factors that contribute to her construction as an objectified and yet active female heroine such as clothing, framing and performance. In the sympathetic analysis the focus was on her character in *The Avengers* (2012). She does however first appear in *Iron Man 2* (2010) where her talent for espionage is maintained throughout several scenes before real abilities are revealed. Her sexuality is emphasized with tight clothing, her cleavage is always visible and she is flirtatious towards male characters. Her initial relevance lies completely in her sexuality as it is apparently the reason Tony Stark (Iron Man) hires her to be his assistant. When she is revealed to be an undercover agent for Shield her sexuality is still emphasized with the camera aligning viewers with her ass as she walks towards Iron Man and Nick Fury, her boss (*Iron Man*, 1:02:13-1:02:21). She is immediately established as desirable and sexy in her first scene in *The Avengers* (2012) where she simulates the damsel in distress and deftly uses her sexuality to extract information. Her figure is accentuated with a little black dress and it is adamantly clear that her sexuality is her most advantageous power (Brown, 2016, p. 53). Her subsequently revealed fighting capabilities establish her as more than the helpless female but the insinuation is that her gender has more to do with her successful espionage and interrogation than her fighting skills. This sets the tone for the following one-on-one scenes where she always uses the traditional and societal ideas on females as the weaker sex to her advantage. For her conversation with Banner she acts as a tender and understanding woman and fakes getting emotional while interrogating Loki. Pretending to be soft and fragile ultimately works and narratively using her gender and the associations that come with it against male characters makes sense.

Natasha's clothing is a significant factor in discussing how she is objectified. It is especially interesting in comparison to the male characters. The 80's introduced the trend in action and adventure films of visually emphasizing the physical strength of the film heroes. The strength of the male characters is emphasized in the franchise with shots of them half naked and their strong bare arms are often visible. During fighting however, they are generally fully clothed in their very iconic costumes with their very iconic weapons (Iron Man in his iron suit, Thor with his hammer and Captain America his shield). Her iconic and trademark costume is a tight, black, "form-fitting jumpsuit ... usually unzipped enough to show off ample cleavage" (Brown, 2016, p. 53). While the male character's physical prowess is celebrated its visibility is not presented as an advantageous skill they possess. Their uncovered muscled upper body suggests physical strength, while a visible cleavage suggest

sexuality. This is an important distinction between male and female characters in this film and in the franchise as a whole. Other major female characters, such as Gamorra from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and the Scarlet Witch from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), always display a visible cleavage. Additionally, all three constantly wear heels which cannot realistically be comfortable or suitable for fighting. The female's sexuality is always visibly emphasized while the males is not. This maintains the idea that heroines need to be beautiful and sexy to attract an audience while a hero does not. Case in point, Bruce Banner who changes into a big monster man and is not presented as a sexy, muscular, green and half-naked Hulk but simply a monster. Superheroines "have to be depicted as hypersexual in order to fend off any accusations of being masculinized" (2016, p. 52). It is interesting to consider that this idea has seemingly become an integral part of how heroines are presented in the genre when the most successful leading heroines were the masculine Ellen Ripley and Sarah Connor.

How Natasha is consistently objectified is certainly an example of appeasing the castration anxiety Laura Mulvey considers to be the source of the objectification tradition. Natasha possesses skills far beyond the reach of any ordinary male audience member without having a penis. Mulvey suggest that male viewers are afraid of what is different, that they cannot identify with a female character and the only way to enable engaged viewing is to degrade the female character with sexualizing her (Mulvey, 1975, p. 13). Natasha is constantly objectified with performance, framing and shooting, and the form-fitting clothing exemplify a constant sexualization because they emphasize her figure when the other factors do not. In the sympathetic analysis character action and performance, along with gender, were determined to be the most influential techniques in aligning viewers with the character and encouraging allegiance. These techniques are subsequently also prominent factors in sexualizing the character. Facial expressions and dialogue delivery are often flirtatious and suggesting. Her sexualized performance is more apparent in *Iron Man 2* due to the long period of masquerading. Comments like "is that dirty enough for you" (*Iron Man 2*, 51:11-52:14) and "do you think I'm pretty?" (*The Avengers*, 12:28-12:31) said with a flirtatious smile and batting her eyelashes establishes her sexuality as an asset. Various shots of Natasha that accentuate her figure or show her in a compromising situation are additional indicators. The end of her first scene shows her whole body from behind and her turning her upper body so that all of her "assets" are visible (ass and bosom). This is similar to how she was positioned on the original film poster, which was highly criticized for sexism because the

male heroes were heroically posed and facing forward (Brown, 2016, p. 54). During the final fighting scene, she grabs an alien opponent between her legs as she stabs him (*The Avengers*, 1:50:43-1:50:50) which is, out of context, a compromising position which viewers would most likely never see any of the male characters fighting in. The idea that the female character's role is to be an erotic object to be looked at is maintained while it is narratively justified as her greatest weapon in light of male stupidity when faced with a beautiful woman. Both ideas preserve the objectification of the female character for viewers.

The franchise also utilizes the clichéd idea of an action heroine atop a motorcycle in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). In the film the motorcycle enables her to keep up with the superpowered heroes and the robotic villain representing freedom, with it she surpasses her boundaries. Yet it also evokes the question of why she is put on the motorcycle and not Barton (the other non-superpowered member of the team) who instead deftly flies a jet through a city, a vehicle she has previously been shown adeptly flying. For the scene in which the heroes chase after the villain, the vehicle makes narrative sense but the decision to make her, still the only female member of the team, the driver comes across as a form of eroticization. It justifies her abilities for male viewers in that she can control a phallic form between her legs. It maintains the tradition of transcending the passive female character while also preserving her essential role as an object to be looked at. Additionally, regarding castration fears and objectification, she is occasionally ignored by the male characters which can narratively make sense yet also fits in with Mulvey's assertion that interaction diminishes castration anxiety. Blatantly ignoring what she says or not believing her capable of assessing a situation properly reduces her intellectual importance that can assuage the castration anxiety in that despite her exceptional fighting skills she is not independently able to handle certain situations. Captain America's ignorance of her assurance in the final fighting scene in *The Avengers* (1:43:42-1:43:55) and Happy insisting on accompanying her in *Iron Man 2* (1:41:30-1:41:36) are examples of these kinds of interactions that could diminish castration anxiety. These scenes, while narratively sensible or funny, sustain an underlying notion that women are incapable of successfully assessing a situation and reacting accordingly, that they need male authority. In a number of action heroine films this male authority is represented by their father or a father figure. The action heroine seeks her father's approval or to become like her father and it is a thorough way of establishing a legitimate male authority that has control over the female character (Brown, 2011, p. 17). The relationship between Natasha and her boss, Nick Fury, exemplifies this action heroine trend. He treats her as more than merely a

member of his staff, significantly indicated in *Iron Man 2* when he fatherly puts his arms around her as she sits down next to him (*Iron Man 2*, 1:02:28-1:02:38), and she obeys his every command in several films suggesting she seeks his approval. Their relationship symbolizes how male authority establishes control over a female character that threatens the patriarchal oppression and the established dominance and interaction removes the castration anxiety.

The sympathetic analysis revealed a number of expectations the characters behavior and performance generated. These expectations are built on her versatility and adaptability in dealing with different people in various situations. Viewers expect an element of surprise; they cannot be sure if she is masquerading or not but expect that she might be. They also expect her to use her femininity to her advantage, to weaken her opponent's defenses. Viewers do however also base a lot of their expectations on pre-conceived ideas relating to female characters in general, female characters in action and adventure films, action or superheroines and real women. What the schemas listed have in common is likely an expectation of strong emotional reactions from female characters and in her first scenes her emotional reactions are primarily what can be determined as more masculine emotions; anger and determination. There are therefore two reactions deduced as designed to assimilate her character to the pre-conceived expectations both of which were discussed in the sympathetic analysis. There is a tradition in Hollywood films that "supporting players, ethnic minorities, and women be more animated or broadly expressive than white male leads" (Smith, 1995, p. 159). This certainly applies to *The Avengers* (2012) when the alignment strategies for Natasha are considered in comparison with the major male characters. Aligning viewers with her characters is primarily achieved with close-ups of her facial expressions and dialogue. She is however not as vocal in multiple character scenes as the male leads and they are not as facially expressive as she is, despite the fact that she is considerably less facially expressive than the stereotypical female character. She is therefore conclusively assimilated to stereotypical ideas on female characters and noticeably so because she is the character that embodies the fear of Banner's transformation and the only one that displays a relatively strong emotional reaction other than anger. While her character even challenges the stereotypical action heroine these out of character emotional reactions along with the objectification make sure that Natasha does not exceed viewers expectations too much.

The few emotional reactions are however also a factor in how Natasha challenges the passive female stereotype and the contemporary action heroine. Despite being visibly the

most emotional character in comparison with the male characters she does primarily embody the action hero's detached attitude in making fun of everything to mask any sympathetic feelings and having an unwavering belief in her own abilities. She is not as emotional as viewers might expect, only more emotional than the male characters. The typical action heroine leads her own narrative, is aggressive, strong and heroic. Natasha certainly embodies these elements. In a difficult alignment and allegiance format, a multiple character attachment with omniscient narration, she manages to lead her own narrative in seeking to accomplish an individually established goal according to her own agenda. It is just fortunately linked to the major goal because her disregard for authority is suggested when she interrogates Loki, which is incidentally also a typical trait for action heroes. She is shown to be powerful, strong and capable of protecting herself. She is also aggressive during fighting, but able to utilize the element of surprise linked to her gender in a calm manner. There is a certain balance in how the action heroine transcends and simultaneously embodies the passive female character. Natasha transcends the passive female character somewhat more than the typical action heroine. She is undoubtedly objectified but she also embodies traits typical for the action hero which allow her to challenge this balance. Typical 90's action films like *Top Gun* (1986) feature male heroes who risk their lives and drive or fly extremely fast to prove their manhood (Lewis, 2008, p. 362), all of which Natasha does. The passive female character's purpose is often to inspire the male characters actions which is interestingly turned around in how saving Barton establishes a goal driven narrative for Natasha. This equates her with the male heroes, especially considering that most of them have superpowers where as she makes due with just being an exceptionally skillful but ordinary human and still keeps up. Her confidence in her own abilities is justifiably right, she is proven to be an important and irreplaceable member of the team in the final fighting scene in *The Avengers* which is reinforced *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) along with additional installments in between. Her fighting and flying skills are not always specifically connected to her sexualization or femininity, they also stand by themselves to demonstrate her strength and powerfulness regardless of her gender which is what sets her apart from action heroines like Lara Croft or Barbarella where the sexualization is an inextricable part of them.

The discussion above reveals the fundamental aspects of Natasha's embodiment of the action heroine. She is an active, capable and skillful heroine that is consistently objectified and sexualized to maintain an outdated patriarchal tradition. She does however transcend the tradition to a point where the objectification feels forced. Many of the elements used to

objectify her could easily be disposed of; the form-fitting and revealing attire, poses, framing and flirtatious expressions. The associated femininity and sexuality can be positive in suggesting that women do not have to be masculine in order to be powerful and strong. She has not become a 'pseudo male' and is most definitely a real woman. Women are built differently than men and it makes sense narratively that they would utilize their sexuality to deceive easily distracted male opponents. The problem with this narrative tradition is that it is only ever a female trait which "ultimately reinforces the perception that heroines are more sexual than heroic" (Brown, 2016, p. 54). Grodal suggests that films inevitably have an influence on people's personalities much like interaction with other people does (2009, p. 189). How female characters are presented in films can therefore negatively impact how they are perceived and treated in reality. Repeatedly objectifying and hypersexualizing a strong and powerful female character like the Black Widow maintains both the inequality of depicting women in film and the inequality of society. It suggests that no matter how powerful, strong and capable of defending herself Natasha is, she is unable to escape the confines of her gender. That ultimately femininity is an unescapable weakness.

## Discussion

It is clear from both the sympathetic analysis and the feminist analysis that the character, Natasha Romanoff or the Black Widow, certainly embodies the contemporary action heroine while also slightly transcending her. She is a powerful and strong female character who is repeatedly objectified with various factors that could potentially be relatively simply removed like covering her cleavage and reducing her flirtatious dialogue and expressions. The objectification feels forced in its abundantly clear purpose of exaggerating her assets and hypersexualizing her so that she is in no way perceived as masculine. Marvel cinematic universe has been criticized for its lack of diversity, although they are attempting to rectify, which suggests a fear of challenging the traditions and stereotypes of cinema. The perception is that Natasha is supposed to be seemingly only there to be looked at, to represent the spectacle that the female body has been established as throughout film history, to cover the fact that she as simply a character is indispensable. Or that she is made indispensable to cover up her role as an object to fetishize, whichever reason the objectification factors are so easily identifiable that they feel forced. The filmmakers have an outstanding candidate to challenge the gender constrictions that originated in the castration anxiety and were justifiable intertwined with film tradition. She could go about her day without using her sexuality to her

advantage or accentuating her figure because she has extraordinary fighting skills. Her adaptability and espionage skills are of course made important traits and are narratively justified in her first scene and her interrogation scene. In other scenes however she is not more or less capable of fighting because she has on a tight uniform and heeled boots, these elements used to signify her gender and sexuality serve merely as re-identification factors but are otherwise irrelevant and unnecessary.

There is a typical female character function that the film interestingly transforms to male characters. Female characters have in action and adventure films traditionally served as an incentive for male characters which is turned around in *The Avengers*. Barton and Coulson work as incentives for Natasha's individual goal and to align her goal with the major goal. It is also interesting that neither character is in his own way helpless, they do not generally need saving and yet Natasha has the ability to at least save Barton and does. Natasha's devotion to Barton is maintained throughout films that include her and them and she ultimately sacrifices herself for him, and the world in *Avengers: Endgame*. In relation to the discussion on the various factors used to objectify and establish Natasha's weakness in being a female character, her death is an unsatisfactory end for her character. It signifies that she and Gamora the major female character in the cinematic universe's other team the Guardians of the galaxy who dies in the exact same place in a similar way, are justifiably expendable in dying sacrificially. They are both sacrificed to retrieve the soul stone, a powerful and magical stone relevant to the events in *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. These deaths are relatively sudden, only witnessed by two other characters and therefore come across as anticlimactic ends to these major female characters. It is suspiciously gender related suggesting that despite them both being powerful and transcending characters they are the expendable for the greater good and not a male character. A sacrificial death is always admirable but in comparison with Iron man's sacrificial death shortly after in the same film it is unfulfilling. The scene with Iron Man dying is emotionally triggering with multiple characters surrounding him in farewell, and a subsequent scene of his funeral. Barton was the only major character to witness her death and the subsequent grieving scene was substantially less effective in stimulating an emotional reaction from viewers.

Overall, the positive aspects of this strong and powerful female character that transcends the passive female character and to an extent the action heroine are overshadowed by the constant objectification, hyper sexualization and degradation. The character has the



potential to be truly challenging and transcending, and she is in many ways, but the need to preserve her visual perfection restricts the development.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to determine how Natasha Romanoff encourages viewers identification in a setting with multiple characters, and how her gender influences said identification and the way she is depicted in the film, *The Avengers*. The analysis based on the structure of sympathy revealed various flaws in the immersed character identification Smith and Grodal describe. That is the result of various factors but mainly the action genre's tendency to emphasize the visual spectacle and the film's situation as one narrative component within a larger fictional film series. Recognition, alignment and allegiance are overall decidedly associated with her gender or her feminine sexuality. Viewers are aligned with her with by establishing expectations of her using her feminine sexuality to her advantage, and allegiance is encouraged by linking her to male characters. There were enough visible and audible traits for a solid, yet simple, character construction. Her first two scenes were vital for recognition and re-identification as they established her versatility, adaptability and fighting skills along with her recognizable physical traits. The first scene was furthermore important for alignment in how she was primarily aligned with and emphasized. The alignment was interrupted by degrading her to a supporting character in the third and fourth scene but re-established with her interrogation scene. Aside from these three scenes the narrative attaches to her when suitable for the omniscient narration. The degradation might frustrate viewers fascinated with her, and it also reflects how the character is handled as a primary character throughout the overall narrative franchise without establishing her securely with an individual film. Alignment is furthermore enacted with close-ups of facial expressions and dialogue to allow viewers subjective access to the character. The same close-ups reveal her emotional reactions that I discussed in relation to various subjects, mainly that in comparison to the other characters she shows the most versatile emotions which is interesting in light of her being the only major female character. However, in comparison to typical and passive female characters she does not demonstrate strong and regular emotional reactions. The lack of deep emotional reactions in all characters is also most likely done to not draw from the sensational spectacles that the film emphasizes. The few emotional reactions do however serve their purpose in encouraging allegiance by assimilating her to expectations viewers might have based on their pre-existing ideas. They might appease viewers, in a way.

Her relationships with other characters are an important factor in encouraging allegiance. The overall goal of uniting the various heroes to defeat Loki results in the film devoting most of the alignment and allegiance strategies to elevate the team and encouraging

allegiance to the team, the Avengers. Furthermore, viewers moral evaluation of Natasha and Barton is interdependent in how they elevate each other, him with approving her before she transitioned from evil to good and her with devoting herself to saving him from Loki. They are also juxtaposed as representatives of evil and good which reflects on her previous transition and establishes her moral status as positive in relation to his temporarily evil moral status. Character action is the most influential strategy used to encourage allegiance in how she is depicted as an adaptable, powerful and confident female character who rarely needs to be saved. It is also vital in elevating her repeatedly sexualized character to a positive and powerful heroine. The constant transition from a seemingly innocent and helpless woman to an aggressive and capable fighter regulates expectations and encourages allegiance.

Despite all of these factors contributing to elevating her character I concluded that gender might be the most influential factor because she is the only female character. She is repeatedly put into situations that emphasize her sexuality, figure and femininity and objectified with tight clothing, flirtatious performance and framing. Her repeated emergence as more than the objectified female character encourages allegiance with her unexpected capabilities and her using her gender to her advantage is narratively justified. She is made a part of the spectacle while also allowed to transcend it. She certainly embodies the stereotypical action heroine with being objectified but is also a powerful and capable heroine. What is special about her as an action heroine is how the objectification and sexualization feels forced on her, it is almost unnoticeable during fighting, it is the tight clothing and heels that maintain her status as a sexy female character when other strategies are not used. The sexuality is distinguishable from the powerful and capable heroine. Ultimately sexuality is established as her greatest power but her fighting, flying and shooting skills overshadow that in the scenes. Her gender is relatively irrelevant to those skills. The only scene in which she only uses her gender to her advantage is when interrogating Loki and she does not explicitly use her sexuality but more the perceived emotional weakness of being a woman.

In conclusion, the Black Widow encourages viewers identification with adhering to the unwritten code of being a beautiful and sexualized female character. The challenging aspects of her character are moderated so that viewers expectations are only slightly interrupted. Her connections and relationships with other characters are additionally an influential factor in achieving identification which is ultimately not necessary in this spectacle driven film. The fact that she is the only major female character does certainly recommend her as it is the dominating aspect that recommends her over other characters. However, it is

most likely not enough to outshine the male characters who are given more prominence in both their individual prequels and in *The Avengers*. How she transcends stereotypical female characters and to an extent action heroines is too little to consider her a significant stereotype improvement.

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