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## Representation of defense organizations in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008–2019)

**Abstract**

**Homeland security and defense are common themes in superhero films. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is formed by more than twenty films made over the course of a decade (2008–2019), during the government of three different Presidents of the United States. In this paper we analyze the diminishing representation of real defense forces in the MCU films. How the interference of the superhero is used as a narrative excuse to suggest a lack of or deficiencies in the law concerning freedom and defense is also studied, as well as how the films make a metaphorical discourse about the historical reality after September 11<sup>th</sup>.**

**Keywords**

**Marvel Cinematic Universe, Film studies, organisms of defense, films after 9/11, Superhero genre.**

### 1. Introduction: the keys of Marvel's superhero movies

Superhero movies can be defined as a subcategory of the action-fantastic genre, characterized by the presence of one or more characters that possess supernatural talents –a gift that places them somewhere above other mortals. As Coogan (2006, pp. 30–60) puts it, its defining traits hinge upon the existence of a vital *mission*; a series of *powers* –referred to as *superpowers*, emphasizing an exaggeration inherent to the genre– of a supernatural or miraculous nature, such as the ability to fly, stop bullets, or run at a supersonic pace, for instance; an alternative *identity* articulated around a nickname and materialized in a *uniform* which quite often presents identity traits, such as the “S” in Superman’s chest, or the bat in Batman’s. The genre’s origin roots back to the graphic stories of US comics during World War II, although its precedents can be traced even further back to the mythological origins of world literature (Arnaudo, 2013, p. 12–18; McCausland, 2017, p. 26; González del Pozo, 2014, p. 42). During the last decade more than fifty superhero films have reached movie theaters all over the world, to which we could also add an immeasurable archipelago of TV episodes.

Data are very eloquent regarding the pecuniary motivation behind these blockbusters. With budgets ranging between a hundred and fifty and three hundred and fifty million dollars per movie<sup>1</sup>, the box office around the world for Marvel films has not gone below the five hundred million dollar threshold in the last years; reaching two thousand eight hundred million dollars for just one worldwide release with *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony & Joe Russo,

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<sup>1</sup> Just to mention some examples in this regard, following the information collected by the IMDb online database, *Aquaman* (James Wan, 2018) had an approximate budget of 160 million dollars, practically half of what was invested in *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2018).

2019). This, in turn, gives a very clear idea of the degree of acceptance that these movies have for their audiences.

Defense as a whole is the driving force that all the pieces that can be ascribed to the group have in common. In them, it is common that the individual, the society, the planet, or even the entire galaxy is threatened by a motley crew of villains. It is because of this that it does not seem unlikely that the armed forces and other defense organizations have a prominent role in this type of films.

The so-called “Infinity Saga” of the Marvel Cinematic Universe is made up of more than twenty movies –TV products aside–, which have as a common thread their location within a “shared universe:” all the movies, apart from narratively sharing a common atmosphere, have plots that traverse several films, parallel stories. It is, in short, a corpus that aspires to be unitary (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone, 2016; McSweeney, 2018). Nonetheless, its elaboration has taken more than a decade, which enables the coexistence, under the same franchise, of films produced under the last years of the Bush administration, the two mandates of President Obama, as well as the first moments of the Trump era. The elaboration process has run in parallel, in its chronology and also its metaphorical resonance, with the reconstruction of the World Trade Center’s Ground Zero after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

This link to the US military policy after the attacks in New York should not be taken lightly (Gelado & Sangro, 2016). In fact, Iron Man’s first movie, like many others, received advice and access to facilities and material by the US army (McSweeney, 2018; Secker & Alford, 2019). Rommel-Ruiz states the link when decoding Favreau’s movie, more than as a mere superhero story, as “a complex story about American involvement in the Afghanistan War” (2011, p. 257). As Boggs and Pollard (2016) point out, it is not by chance that many of the fights against the evil forces take place in Manhattan<sup>2</sup>, although the connection and relation with the real facts is usually framed under an allegorical layer, a literary attempt that Ghumkhor has defined as “reinventing the real” (2019, p. 868). In this sense, it is striking that the films of Marvel Cinematic Universe have not been considered in other works on the post 9/11 cinema, such as the ones conducted by Baker (2011), Blackmore (2012) or Carter & Dodds (2011); even more so when they so clearly contradict the belief that these topics lead to box office flops.

## 2. Defense and Security Organizations in the MCU

The present work aims at analyzing, in the first place, the presence and representation of realistic defense forces in superhero movies. In this respect, we start with the hypothesis that the presence of the military and police forces has progressively decreased in these films, and that the realistic forces have given way to different sorts of guardians –more make-believe type of protectors.

Secondly, we will aim at analyzing the interference that the competition between these exceptionally gifted beings and the real defense organizations represents in these stories, as well as their relations of power and influence. From this perspective, a new hypothesis is outlined: the films studied generally show realistic law enforcement as being completely obsolete and unable to face challenges. Defects in the legal framework may also be suggested as the reason behind this incompetence –these deficiencies always happen by default, rather than by excess. In other words, and as pointed out by Acu (2016, p. 198), all the evil in the films studied can be blamed on fantasy enemy forces instead of the culture of paranoia, surveillance and espionage instigated by the traditional institutions of defense. However, it is clear, in any case, that the legitimate forces fail in their duty or are presented as incapable. As Bainbridge (2007, p. 455) suggests, the perceived portrait is one of “failed or deficient law.”

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<sup>2</sup> The authors refer, more specifically to the “Battle of New York”, which takes place in the first *Avengers* movie and that appears once more in the last MCU movie to date, *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2019). In this battle, the forces of good face an alien attack that descends over New York on a flying ship, provoking the collapse of buildings and chaos in the city.

Finally, the power relations within law enforcement itself –superheroes included– will be analyzed with an aim at testing the hypothesis that the main superpower of the protagonists is precisely that they do not need to respect limitations of any kind, neither physical nor legal. Carter y Dodds emphasize (2014, p. 55-56) that for superheroes not only going beyond the rules is unsanctioned but is often presented as a necessity. Phillips & Strobl (2006, p. 310) point out something similar taking the Batman<sup>3</sup> saga, which adapted the DC character to films, as an example.

### 3. Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)

Leaving aside TV production and unreleased projects, at the time of writing this paper, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is composed of more than twenty movies that have been produced since 2008 during different stages. These films can be grouped in different sagas that can be, in turn, classified on behalf of their narrative importance within the context of the anthology.

It is a “shared universe,” following the logics of Marvel carried out in its comic books from the 1960s, when it became the first publishing house releasing superhero stories that coordinated the plots of its different characters in a shared diegetic context (Wright, 2003, p. 218). This way, each character maintains its independent headline; but, nonetheless, what happens in one of the narratives affects all the superheroes sharing said universe. This policy adopted by Marvel Studios indicates two particularisms. On the one hand, the desire to control its own assets; and, on the other, learning from other people’s mistakes. As Stork (quoted in Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone, 2016) highlights that, when the audience reacted badly towards movies licensed to other studios, this had a bigger negative repercussion on Marvel’s reputation than on the studios that produced them. The third film of Spider-Man distributed by Sony, *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007), although relatively successful at the box office, hardly reached 63% rating in the popular aggregator Rotten Tomatoes ([www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com)); FOX’s production *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) plummeted to 27%; *Elektra* (Rob Bowman, 2005), also produced by FOX, not only received poor reviews but was also a box office disaster. Those experiences serve to outline, under the coordination of Kevin Feige (president of Marvel Studios since 2007), the strategy of the shared universe, achieving stories that were also fresh, with approximately one new superhero every year. In those stories, several superheroes intertwined, and the situations presented in them conditioned the events of the upcoming movies. Along with the success experienced, besides the requisite of putting the investment and promotion of all products at the same level, came the interest to strengthen the identity of the whole. Thus, it is not uncommon to find at the end of each movie an announcement of where that particular superhero will appear again. For instance, at the end of the closing credits of *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), there is a statement that says: “Thor will return in *The Avengers*.” In the movie posters themselves, there are also references to other MCU installments, such as “From the studio that brought you *Iron Man*” or “From the studio that brought you *The Avengers*.” Also, the famous “post-credit scenes” anticipate at the end of each film the plot that will be seen in the next movie long before its release (Long, quoted in Scott, 2017, p. 1054).

In an attempt to take down the MCU briefly, we could observe on a first level those essential sagas that make up a structural framework around which the rest build upon. These are the independent sagas of Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, and the Guardians of the Galaxy<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Let us not forget that, in the stories of Batman, the image projected over the clouds of Gotham City to alert Batman is activated, precisely, by the city’s police commissioner.

<sup>4</sup> The figure seems positive, though, when compared to its reboot a decade after that, under Josh Trank’s direction, it hardly reached 9% in 2015. This probably places the movie as the worst rated superhero film in the history of the site.

<sup>5</sup> *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), and *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013); *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2014), and *Captain*

Iron Man's character is, in reality, Tony Stark, a multimillionaire playboy who has inherited his fortune from his father's armament factories. When he is captured by a group of terrorists in Afghan territory<sup>6</sup>, he manages to escape from captivity by building an armored frame that he remodels little by little until it becomes a deadly weapon. It could be said that, through the three monographic titles that MCU dedicates to this character, he always ends up facing, one way or another, negative representations of himself: unscrupulous businessmen in the arms industry that do not hesitate to cause 'false flag' raids or terrorist attacks with the sole intention of disseminating enough panic to maximize their profits, which orients the topic to what Calbreath-Fraiseur refers to as a plot driven by business avarice behind a visible threat (2014, p. 26).

The character of Captain America is developed throughout the MCU in two-time frameworks. Steve Rogers is a young man who wants to enlist to fight in World War II –although it can be said that the representation of this conflict follows what Noon (2004, p. 341) links to the realm of myths more than historical facts–, but his physical condition makes him useless for war purposes. Nevertheless, his moral attitudes and his patriotism and ability to sacrifice for others catch the eye of an army scientist. These traits, unarguably the most constant identity traits of the character (Dittmer, 2005), make him the ideal candidate in the eyes of the scientist to become the first patient of an experiment designed to turn him into a supersoldier, which would not only allow him to join the fight, but also to do so in a supernatural manner. Opponents, however, quickly live up to his performance thanks to the power emanating from an alien artifact that has fallen into their hands. Thanks to his powers, Captain America survives frozen over the decades and comes back in modern times.

Unlike the previous characters, Thor is presented as a being halfway between the extraterrestrial and the extradimensional, closer to the realm of Norse mythology. His trilogy within the MCU is far from the terrestrial scope and its narrative importance within the anthology as a whole will be lesser compared to the aforementioned sagas.

Thirdly, the Guardians of the Galaxy is a group of space mercenaries. Their story unfolds entirely in the confines of the universe, although the main protagonist is of earthling origin.

On a second level we can include those franchises that have characters that play a secondary role in the MCU, such as the sagas dedicated to Hulk, Ant-Man, Doctor Strange, Spider-Man, Black Panther or Captain Marvel<sup>7</sup>. These superheroes, undoubted protagonists of their own individual stories, will regularly play secondary roles in the sequels and third parts of the franchises of other aforesaid characters.

Finally, we have those works that bring together characters from different independent sagas under the framework of the so-called Avengers<sup>8</sup>, where other superheroes, such as Scarlet Witch, Vision, War Machine, Falcon, Hawkeye or Black Widow (who have not been blessed –at least while this text was being written– with a film) have a place. Hawkeye and Black Widow are the only humans who are part of the gang of superheroes on the sole basis of their ordinary abilities, with no further need for technological tools nor supernatural powers (Acu, 2016, p. 196).

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*America: Civil War* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2016); *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013), and *Thor: Ragnarok* (Taika Waititi, 2017); *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014), and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (James Gunn, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> In its first appearance in the comic world, however, in *Tales of suspense* #39, in March 1963, the character is kidnapped by North-Vietnamese forces.

<sup>7</sup> *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008); *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015) and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (Peyton Reed, 2018); *Doctor Strange* (James Gunn, 2017); *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017) and *Spider-Man: Far from home* (Jon Watts, 2019) –which exceeds the time framework of the present work–; *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018); *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden & Ryan Fleck, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Marvel's The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony & Joe Russo, 2019).

The Marvel Universe is, however, a transmedia world completed, additionally to the films, by several television series, short films and, of course, comics that, in some way, also participate in the development of the plots, as already pointed out by Scott (2017, p. 1045).

#### 4. Method of analysis

Our understanding of a defense institution equals any mechanism oriented to that end, and that is inherent to the rule of law –hence subject to its influence and legal responsibility. The representations, in the aforementioned films, of the armed forces, both police and military, as well as the national or supranational organizations that are entrusted with citizen protection, will be analyzed. This premise, although apparently simple, becomes complex throughout the films, among other reasons because of the irruption in the plot of the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, a fictional spy and anti-terrorism agency that remains accountable to an entity that is never entirely clear: on some occasions it appears to be under the jurisdiction of a sort of United Nations, and in other cases it seems to be solely under the influence of the United States<sup>9</sup>. In fact, the liaison of the Department of Defense Phil Strub resorted precisely to the aforesaid indeterminacy and fictitious entity to reject any type of advice to the franchises by the Pentagon (Ackerman, 2012) –although, as emphasized by Secker and Alford (2019, p. 352), his name, like that of CIA adviser Chase Brandon, appears on the thanks & credits in the first Avengers film. This defense organization has a special link with the entire superhero squad to the point of being, at the same time, a cohesive element for all the films in the anthology. Nonetheless, we will not include it in the analysis as an earthly defense organization because of its fictional origin.

In order to assess the quantitative value of the presence of defense organizations in the films studied, we opted for counting the number of frames in which they appear. To do this, digitized copies of all films have been used and optimized at 24 frames per second. Through the use of Adobe Premiere Pro audiovisual editing software, which allows work on a frame-by-frame analysis, all the fragments in which elements that could be cataloged as being within the range of defense agencies or institutions were isolated for their later analysis.

This aspect has later been put in relation to the total footage of the film, including the so-called “post-credit scenes,” which are common in these type of films, but excluding the opening and final credits –to avoid that the extension of the crew could interfere with the results of the study. The presence of the earthly police and military forces has been confirmed through all those instances that may be representative: realistic military uniforms, vehicles, buildings, or installations. We have not considered in this group, in addition to the aforesaid S.H.I.E.L.D. forces or Hydra<sup>10</sup>, the presence of private security staff. Regarding the presence of the superheroes themselves when their origin or affiliation is already part of the military –Captain America, Captain Marvel, etc.– they have only been counted as such when in the films they are shown in uniform and portrayed far from any superpower or device that gives them such cutting edge.

In order to develop the study from its qualitative perspective, a content analysis of the presence of these elements has been carried out, starting from the narrative context of the film. Thus, firstly, an analysis of the superheroes’ origins in relation to their peer group has been conducted, observing not only their earthling or alien nature, but also their connection with the military or their closeness to armed/defense forces. Secondly, their relationship with the earthly forces present in each film has been observed, analyzing, specifically, the superhero’s place within the arms race. Thirdly, the relationship between superheroes and the real defense forces has been examined, with a closer look at the legal limitations that condition the behavior and protocols of law enforcement agencies within the context of the

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<sup>9</sup> Their weapon power, however, is never questioned: they come to possess, among other fantastic weaponry, up to three flying aircraft carriers called *helicarriers*.

<sup>10</sup> Fictional terrorist force presented often as S.H.I.E.L.D.’s antithesis.

rule of law. Thus, special attention has been paid to acts of insubordination, rebellion, or to the measures used by earthly organizations to control or monitor the action of superheroes. Finally, the sociopolitical context in which the films have been made has always been considered to verify to what extent they reflect, even if in an allegorical way, the reality of their time.

## 5. Discussion of results

### 5.1. *Primus inter pares*

The basic principle sustaining the dramatic development of all superhero movies is the idea of the existence of superior beings and the logics that, on the basis of that superiority, they do have some kind of responsibility towards the inhabitants of the Earth. Defense becomes, in this respect, the main task of these creatures. However, it is common that this precept is nuanced precisely depending on the superhero's origin. Thus, those protagonists of alien origin, like Thor, will be often faced with the dilemma –often verbalized by their opponents– of why the obligation on their part towards those insignificant earthlings.

Superheroes born to a human mother, however, usually have no alternative. In the MCU films studied, it is taken for granted that those humans who, due to mutations, exposure to gamma rays, radioactive spider bites or access to an exclusive futuristic or extraterrestrial technology, acquire the superhero status, have a moral obligation to defend their kind against threats to society. As with Trojan prince Hector, these *princeps* must be in the vanguard against the forces that try to destroy the values and foundations that social order in cities, understanding the latter as a metaphor for the population as a whole (Encinas Cantalapiedra, 2013).

It is not surprising that most of these heroes already had, in their origin, some connection with the armed forces. Such would be the case, of course, with Captain America, the “Winter Soldier,” Falcon, Hawkeye, War Machine, or the Black Widow. Likewise, this connection can also be seen, as we have already pointed out, in tycoon-engineer Tony Stark, who is a weapons supplier for the army before becoming Iron Man; or Dr. Bruce Banner, who is one of the scientists involved in nuclear weapons testing before becoming the Hulk.

However, belonging to the armed forces does not necessarily determine that the protagonists will submit to the chain of command. An exacerbated individualism is a common denominator for practically all superheroes, which is evident even in those films where they act as a group, as seen in *The Avengers* and its sequels. It is common to find moments of insubordination in each and every one of the heroes, and these are not followed by any type of subsequent punishment beyond some slight reprimand.

For instance, in his first military intervention during World War II, Captain America disregards the commanding colonel's express prohibition and goes alone behind the enemy lines, managing to rescue an entire battalion through his own means. Once he returns to base camp, he makes himself available to the colonel so he can take whatever disciplinary action he deems appropriate. The colonel determines that it is not necessary.

Common to all these movies is the fact that, as soon as the superhero takes the lead of the situation, the police forces place themselves entirely at his disposal, completely ignoring the chain of command. This irruption can be seen in the urban battles of films such as *The Avengers*, where superheroes and defense organizations fight side by side against villains who have come, normally, from the other side of the cosmos.

### 5.2. *Inter arma, silent leges*

The superior role played by the protagonists of superhero movies is often presented as an aspect granted due to a certain situation of arms proliferation. While some of them have obtained their powers on the basis of their extraterrestrial origin or their own nature or condition, others are, conversely, the product of a process of research and development that

is usually based, precisely, on the armed forces themselves and the technology applied to warfare.

In other cases, superheroes themselves become the subject and object of experimentation for war purposes. This would be the case of Captain America, who at the beginning of his fable is nothing but an aspiring volunteer with a series of physical obstacles that make it impossible for him to serve in the military. Nevertheless, he manages to access an experimental program that seeks to create “supersoldiers” in World War II. A similar approach can be applied to the Hulk, who is referred to by General Ross as “army property.”

In these stories, the presence of the armed forces often has an ambivalent nuance. They are set out to achieve laudable ends and have a high capacity. However, something usually goes wrong, notably due to an excess of greed by the corporations and companies in charge of manufacturing and selling such discoveries. Thus, the usual plot in the movies studied lands on a villain who manages to get hold of the heroes’ talents, either by reproducing technological advances –as would be the case in all the sequels of Iron Man– or by achieving the same biological advances as these –like, for example, the Winter Soldier–. The paradox is that the films show that, in the face of their own machinations and advances, the armed forces reveal themselves as useless and only superheroes can face the evils created by the enemy with the same technology.

The plot of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) is particularly noteworthy in this respect. In this film, the villain is an artificial intelligence recreated by the Avengers themselves. The fight against this machine, which is always ahead of the game, is not solved until the fantastic creation of a new artificial intelligence oriented to the common good: a superhero named Vision.

The technological advantage is also the underlying reason for Oscar nominated *Black Panther* for Best Picture (Ryan Coogler, 2018), which takes the action to a remote African kingdom that hides highly advanced technology. The plot will hinge upon the debate between making it known to the rest of the world or not, in the context of the dynastic crisis that the ruling monarchy is going through. Something similar happens to the so-called “Infinity Gems,” orbs of such fantastic origin such as the *vibranium* that underpins the technological advance of Black Panther’s kingdom, and oriented equally towards war and destruction.

### 5.3. *Corruptio optimi pessima*

In relation to the previous point, it is quite common to find the armed forces themselves embodying the superhero’s antagonist, often even engaging in behaviors that go against the law. General Ross, while chasing the protagonist in *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008) will not hesitate when it comes to bombing the streets, parks and gardens of the fictional Culver University unilaterally and without authorization. Even more so, he will also transform one of his soldiers into another beast similar to the Hulk to be able to hunt him down.

It is not unlikely either to find the vestiges of the fictional Hydra organization, which was born under Nazism during World War II and seems to have corrupted the upper chain of command of both the aforesaid S.H.I.E.L.D. and the conventional armed forces. This corruption is especially evident in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2014), a film in which the character played by Robert Redford is presented as the highest authority of the S.H.I.E.L.D. forces and later reveals himself as the villain in disguise.

Corruption, however, is not perceived as the common denominator in the representation of defense organizations in the MCU films. Although there are exceptions, as in the aforesaid cases, the truth is that the role played by traditional defense forces usually sides with the hero, who can always reach where they cannot. Thus, it is common to link these negative values with agents that do not belong to the armed forces or the police. Hence corruption is restricted to villains who may be either entities that come from other planets or dimensions, agents of enemy societies, entrepreneurs in the arms industry whose greed goes beyond the

common good –as in the aforementioned examples from the Iron Man saga, the main villain in both installments dedicated to Ant-Man, etc.–, arms thieves who see in the given circumstance an option to achieve economic stability –as would be the case of the villain in *Spiderman Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017)–; or some character whose personal resentment deviates him from military virtue –such as the villains in the aforementioned *Captain America: Civil War* or *Black Panther*.

#### 5.4. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

The films released in the last five years question who superheroes should answer to. Already in the beginning of the entire anthology, just after the opening of *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), the need to delimit superheroes' unbounded action is addressed. When investigated by a Senate commission of the United States, Tony Stark/Iron Man defends that his armor is not a weapon, but a "high-tech prosthesis." In his appearance, Stark does not hesitate to refer to the senator who interrogates him as "dear," nor does he hesitate to hack on the spot the entire video system of the federal institution, from his mobile phone.

Little by little, however, the character's arrogant attitude becomes increasingly fearful of the superheroes' destructive potential that he, in a way, feels he has contributed to develop. Likewise, the permissiveness with which superheroes' excesses were treated in the early MCU films suddenly dissipates. After Phase 3, the films start to assess the collateral damage caused in the preceding films. The chaos unleashed after the urban battles of New York and Sokovia<sup>11</sup> are mindset changers on the control that superheroes must submit to. In *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2016), the Avengers set out the possible need to submit to military command and limit the actions –and collateral damage– that they can cause with their supernatural powers. Paradoxically, it is the businessman Stark who advocates for this, as opposed to the military man, Captain America, who is more reluctant, hinting a certain distrust of the armed forces. This distrust is then justified in the film when evil secretary of state Thaddeus E. Ross enters the scene. Ross, the aforementioned general who tried to hunt down the Hulk, will even jail the superheroes in a facility specifically built for them –without the mediation of any trial or legal defense of any kind.

The dilemma of whether heroes must respond to civil order and international law or continue to act outside the institutions is never fully answered, and the confrontation among the characters on this topic will be maintained in the rest of the films. They will reach, though, a final agreement when absolute helplessness occurs: Thanos, the most powerful villain of them all, achieves, through the "Infinity Gems," the power that allows him to annihilate half of the world population at will. The motivation is exactly the same as Ultron's artificial intelligence in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015): humanity as the main danger to itself. Superheroes do not play a minor role in such threatening contexts, since on numerous occasions they have been presented as the remote cause of the evils they seek to eradicate.

#### 5.5. *Quantitative approach*

As can be seen in the results table, the presence of defense institutions in the frames of the MCU films varies, being in any case greater in the films of the so-called Phase 1.

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<sup>11</sup> A fictional country that is apparently inspired in actual Kosovo.



**Table 1:** Representation of defense organizations and institutions in the MCU.

<b>Title and year</b>	<b>Analyzed footage</b>	<b>Analyzed frames</b>	<b>D.O. Presence</b>	<b>D.O. Presence (frames)</b>	<b>Percentage D.O. Presence</b>
<i>Iron Man</i> (2008)	01:57:12:21	168.789	00:18:17:05	26.333	15,60%
<i>The Incredible Hulk</i> (2008)	01:44:57:21	151.149	00:41:53:00	60.312	39,90%
<i>Iron Man 2</i> (2010)	01:57:10:19	168.739	00:19:44:21	28.437	16,85%
<i>Thor</i> (2011)	01:46:03:08	152.720	00:00:11:09	273	0,18%
<i>Captain America</i> (2011)	01:53:38:15	163.647	00:59:21:21	85.485	52,24%
<i>The Avengers</i> (2012)	02:13:09:11	191.747	00:03:17:19	4.747	2,48%
<b>PHASE 1</b>		<b>996.791</b>		<b>205.587</b>	<b>20,62%</b>
<i>Iron Man 3</i> (2013)	01:59:30:23	172.103	00:05:44:08	8.264	4,80%
<i>Thor The Dark World</i> (2013)	01:43:46:19	149.443	00:04:04:09	5.865	3,92%
<i>C.A. Winter Soldier</i> (2014)	02:06:20:09	181.929	00:05:34:05	8.021	4,41%
<i>Guardians of Galaxy</i> (2014)	01:54:12:00	164.448	00:00:00:00	0	0,00%
<i>Avengers Age of Ultron</i> (2015)	02:10:57:02	188.570	00:01:45:00	2.520	1,34%
<i>Ant-Man</i> (2015)	01:48:31:09	156.273	00:07:18:07	10.519	6,73%
<b>PHASE 2</b>		<b>1.012.766</b>		<b>35.189</b>	<b>3,47%</b>
<i>C. A. Civil War</i> (2016)	02:18:30:01	199.441	00:30:35:20	44.060	22,09%
<i>Doctor Strange</i> (2016)	01:46:53:13	153.925	00:00:00:00	0	0,00%
<i>Guardians... Vol. 2</i> (2017)	02:06:39:18	182.394	00:00:00:00	0	0,00%
<i>Spider-Man Home...</i> (2017)	02:03:06:13	177.277	00:03:05:06	4.446	2,51%
<i>Thor Ragnarok</i> (2017)	02:01:11:08	174.512	00:00:00:00	0	0,00%
<i>Black Panther</i> (2018)	02:04:40:12	179.532	00:11:17:01	16.249	9,05%
<i>Avengers Infinity War</i> (2018)	02:18:02:16	198.784	00:01:03:10	1.522	0,77%
<i>Ant-Man...The Wasp</i> (2018)	01:48:42:22	156.550	00:08:50:22	12.742	8,14%
<i>Captain Marvel</i> (2019)	01:53:44:00	163.776	00:17:47:10	25.618	15,64%
<i>Avengers Endgame</i> (2019)	02:48:22:00	242.448	00:07:59:15	11.511	4,75%
<b>PHASE 3</b>		<b>1.828.639</b>		<b>116.148</b>	<b>6,35%</b>
<b>MCU: TOTAL</b>		<b>3.838.196</b>		<b>356.924</b>	<b>9,30%</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

The first film of the anthology, dedicated to Iron Man, shows him as a weapons supplier for the United States Army –he is portrayed as someone closely linked to it. The film not only includes many highly decorated military officers at parties and events organized around Mr. Stark, but also begins with Stark himself presenting his weapons to his clients on Afghan soil, which leads to the attack on his convoy. The connection with the armed forces in this film and in its sequel, business closeness aside, is also embodied by Colonel James Rhodes –who will later become superhero War Machine–, who turns out to be the best friend of the protagonist.

The second MCU film, dedicated to the Hulk, is, generally speaking, respectful of the previous work on the character, a film directed by Ang Lee that is not considered part of the same universe<sup>12</sup>. The extensive military presence in the film is justified precisely by its villains. Throughout the entire film, the Hulk is chased by General Ross and his soldiers and runs away from them. Ross who turns out to be, at the same time, the father of the protagonist's beloved. Thirdly, the military presence in the inaugural film of the Captain America saga becomes evident as it diegetically places itself in the context of the World War.

<sup>12</sup>There is a previous movie dedicated to the character, *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), that does not belong to the MCU.

Within Phase 1, the movies dedicated to Thor and the first installment of the Avengers franchise clearly stand out. In these films, S.H.I.E.L.D. takes over the role played by traditional security forces, thus reducing to mere anecdotes the presence of real and earthly organizations –police sirens, agents who come momentarily as the first response to the catastrophes presented in both films, etc. This way, in the subsequent works studied, the real military presence will give way to the fictional S.H.I.E.L.D. organization. Throughout Phases 2 and 3, the presence of the defense forces decreases drastically in all films except *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2016) and Captain Marvel's presentation film. The justification for this second case is also evident, since the movie unfolds, in flashbacks, the protagonist's past as a war pilot for the US Army that preceded the moment of her becoming the MCU's first female superhero to get a standalone film. In the aforementioned case, the greater military presence is fundamentally due to the interference, once again, of General Ross, now a secretary of state. As the plot progresses, Captain America turns into a fugitive, which mobilizes all the police and military forces in search of him –all of which leads to a greater presence of these groups in the analyzed frames.

### 5.6. A reflection of the times

A relationship between the political and social context in which the films were produced and the military presence in them can be seen. MCU's foundational works, dedicated to Iron Man and the Hulk respectively, were released still under the Bush administration. It was the time of the "War on Terror" doctrine that followed the 9/11 attacks in New York, and also of the Iraq War, whose end would not be declared until December 2011. The first Iron Man movie criticizes the US arms industry while advocating for nuanced military interventionism based on more efficient use of technology. After his kidnapping and subsequent escape, tycoon Stark offers a press conference –while casually eating a burger– in which he declares that having seen Americans die from the weapons he manufactures has opened his eyes to abandon that line of business. Moments later, we witness the first acid test for his suit: he personally travels with his armor to a remote region of Afghanistan and frees its citizens from the terrorist yoke with the millimeter neatness of its projectiles.

In the aforementioned "Battle of New York," which can be seen in the first installment of *The Avengers*, Joss Whedon does not hesitate to use hand-held camera shots of New Yorkers fleeing the collapse of buildings under the alien attack. There are also television broadcast shots of streets clouded by dust, and full of firefighters and emergency personnel that undoubtedly evoke the real images televised that day in 2001. On the other hand, at the apex of Captain America's first film, he is aboard a massive aircraft that has been programmed by the villain to crash its catastrophic cargo in New York City. In a display of bravery and sacrifice, the Captain crashed the plane over the sea in an act that could be linked to what happened with United Airlines Flight 93 on 9/11.

Thus, it is not by chance that the Phase 2 developed after the battle has been linked to a state of post-traumatic shock. More specifically, the link has been highlighted in relation to the attitude of the characters who serve as sustaining pillars in its evolution in the narrative framework of the anthology –Iron Man and Captain America. The character of Iron Man, in fact, clearly suffers from post-traumatic shock throughout the third installment of his saga –a film in which he has to save, with all the symbolic burden that this entails, the president of the United States himself. Captain America becomes, in turn, a mistrustful character who, in the second film of his franchise, uncovers a whole network of enemy spies embedded at the very heart of the United States institutions –in fact, their embarkment on a civilian surveillance project resonates with the USA PATRIOT Act. Agent Nick Fury's verbalization of the justification for this in the film –when the Captain questions the project– cross-refers to an ambivalent time frame both within and outside the context of the film. His specific words are: "after New York."

The films in Phase 3 outline, in the first instance, a revision towards the acts of superheroes themselves and the responsibility derived from these actions. However, plenty of works present new and increasingly supernatural characters, located in entirely fictional locations, or with plots based on alien wars caused by the “Infinity Gems” in outer space and, consequently, far from the reach of the defense forces analyzed in this study.

## 6. Conclusions

As has been confirmed in this research, the representation of defense agencies and their institutions throughout the MCU films has an uneven nature. In the first place, based solely on its quantification of frames in the films, the representation of realistic forces is greater in the first films of the anthology, although notably decreasing in presence in the films released since 2011. This fact comes to support the theses that relates film production to the political and social context of the United States during the Iraq War and, especially, the dramatic relationship that can be drawn between all the titles of the MCU and the climate after the 9/11 attacks. As from 2011, the representation of the armed forces in the movies gives way to the increasingly important role played by fictional agencies, such as S.H.I.E.L.D. or its nemesis Hydra. In most cases, these organizations end up holding the responsibilities of security and defense, substituting real institutions that are either reduced to more punctual appearances, or only related to the military origin of new characters. All in all, we can confirm that our first hypothesis has been verified.

Secondly, among the features that stand out in the works studied regarding the representation of traditional defense organizations, the first one to be pointed out must be their absolute inability to manage the crises that they need to face. This highlights the need for the presence of superheroes, whose actions, often outside the law, are not only unpunished but even celebrated by the authorities. Thus, at least partly, our second hypothesis is verified too. The films studied generally show forces of order as being incapable of facing threats. This requires, however, some nuancing: quite a few superheroes have their origins precisely within the armed forces themselves or achieve their superpowers thanks to the arms race that takes place within them. There is, in fact, an obsessive tendency on the part of traditional defense organizations towards war-oriented technological development. The race to achieve weapons of greater and more efficient combat capacity will be a common place in the stories. This eagerness will also be inherited by the fictional agencies that take over after 2011, becoming, in a way, a shared trait between the fictional and the real.

Also related to this enthusiasm for weapons, the security and defense forces will play antagonistic roles in many films in which they are portrayed as obsessive, irresponsible and even contrary to law. Institutional corruption will be a recurring theme as from MCU's Phase 2, although, once again, representation will no longer correspond to real institutions and forces, but to fictitious organizations. This leads to metaphorical criticism, on the basis of the superheroes' distrust towards these institutions.

The trend, however, shifts radically as from Phase 3, when superheroes are subjected to scrutiny by international agencies and are required to abide by the legislation and put themselves under the command of supranational entities. In any case, at the moment of truth, superheroes present themselves as uncontrollable. This leads us to confirm our third hypothesis since, even when they are subject to legal or coercive limitations, superheroes always end up having their way.

The MCU is, at the time of writing this article, amidst an ongoing Phase 4 with new titles and new narratives. Some characters will give way to new protagonists with different characteristics and new motivations. It remains to be seen what importance is reserved as a whole to the realistic traditional defense institutions and organizations and whether, among the opulent exaggeration of the superheroes, a narrative gap is glimpsed for the real defenders.

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