

Disruption and Disability Futures in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014)

Abstract

Marvel superhero movies celebrate the transformation of disabled people into weapons. *First Avenger* depicts a disabled man rebuilt by military technology into a patriotic superhero. In *Winter Soldier*, the Soviet cyborg's brutal, non-consensual modification serves to emphasise Captain America's wholesomely perfected body. At first glance, both films seem incapable of critiquing the historical ableism that made Captain America's modification a desirable image of disability-free future in 1941 – let alone its modern manifestations.

However, re-watching *First Avenger* after *Winter Soldier* reveals a far less stable endorsement of eliminating disability: now alerted to the series' precise anxieties about bodily autonomy, one can perceive an undercurrent of disability critique running through *First Avenger* too – often literally in the background. The film exposes the historical ableism that shaped Steve's consent to modification, and begins to establish his sidekick Bucky Barnes as a persistent critical voice capable of envisioning a different disability future.

This essay is therefore not only about ableism in a pair of superhero movies, but also about how these ableist films contain seeds of an unexpected critique of their own disability representation.

Introduction

Marvel superhero movies like *Iron Man* (2008) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) celebrate transforming disabled people into living weapons. Cheyney applies McRuer's concept of "compulsory able-bodiedness" to science fiction texts in which disability is removed not by addressing social exclusion, but by transforming or eliminating impaired

bodies with technology (Cheyne 142-143; McRuer 9). On my initial viewing, I was convinced that this applied to Marvel blockbusters *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) and *Captain America: the Winter Soldier* (2014).¹ *First Avenger* depicts a disabled man rebuilt by military technology – in a single spectacular procedure – into a patriotic superhero. In *Winter Soldier*, the Soviet cyborg villain’s brutal, non-consensual modification serves to emphasise Captain America’s wholesomely perfected body. In a kind of disability Cold-War space race, Captain America triumphs over the Soviet Winter Soldier in representing what Mitchell and Snyder call “ablenationalism”, “wherein excessive displays of body supplementation are trafficked globally as signs of the completion (even transcendence) of the limitations of disabled bodies” (*Biopolitics*, 36). Schalk’s discussion of “disability hierarchy” in futuristic science-fiction films is apparent here, as Captain America films seemingly embrace privileging the heroic WWII veterans over a veteran of problematic subsequent wars (406), physical impairments over PTSD and brain injury (411) – and, most importantly:

disability-free futures [that] participate in the disability hierarchy by placing disabled people who use technology to approximate an idealized or even enhanced bodymind near the top while the disabled person who uses technology to cease to be disabled is the most preferred disabled person of all. (412)

I assumed that replicating this structure rendered Captain America films incapable of critiquing the ableism at their heart.

¹ Du Dauw’s and Grue’s 2021 works on superhero bodies also examine the ways this genre tends to replicate neoliberal ableism.

However, subsequent re-viewing reveals a far less stable ideological project. Claverie demonstrates that contradictions unfold between different aspects of plot, dialogue, visual design, casting, and performance even within a single superhero film, and that audiences exploit these contradictions to elicit meanings that the script ostensibly fails to address (160). Captain America films are further destabilised by their eagerness to position themselves within a “Captain America archive” of interconnected comics, films, TV series, and fanworks, many of which reflect critically upon each other across several decades (Derecho 65 on “archives”). In 2009, Hack explored the evolving engagement with eugenic discourses in Captain America comics since 1941, and acknowledged the forceful critique of white supremacy offered by *The Truth: Red, White, and Black* (2003) (79). In 2011, *First Avenger* appeared to reverse (and disappoint) *Truth*’s critical trajectory – but rewatching *First Avenger* after *Winter Soldier* offers a new experience: once alerted to the series’ precise anxieties about bodily autonomy, one can perceive undercurrents of critique running through *First Avenger* too. These critiques include mis-en-scène that foregrounds ableist social pressures coercing Steve’s “choice” to eliminate his disability, and the peculiar backfire of using the Winter Soldier to reinforce disability hierarchy because, once inserted into the story, the irreparably traumatised, mutilated veteran remains a disruptive presence – even hinting at an alternative disability future based not on technological transformation but on interdependence.

This essay is therefore not only about ableism in a pair of superhero movies, but also about how these ableist films contain an unexpected critique of their own disability representation.

Disabling Steve Rogers

First Avenger depicts Steve Rogers' rejection for military service in WWII, and his high-tech transformation into a super-soldier. A military questionnaire, shown on screen, lists peculiarly imprecise diagnoses that render Steve unfit, including "heart trouble" (?), "nervous trouble of any sort" (?), "chronic or frequent colds", and "easy fatiguability"; the report states that his mother died of tuberculosis. A military doctor tells him "You'd be ineligible on your asthma alone", and stamps his application "4F": rejected (00:08:03-00:08:45). Steve's asthma might be classified as "a disability" under the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990) if it "substantially limits one or more major life activities" (ADA). However, once scientist Erskine allows Steve to enter Basic Training, we do not see Steve "limited" by any of the conditions listed, and only disadvantaged by other recruits and military equipment being much larger than him (00:20:21). We may turn instead to the definition created in 1976 by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, for whom disability was:

the disadvantage or restriction of activity *caused by contemporary social organisation* which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities. (Barnes 4. My emphasis)

Steve's society excludes him from full participation, and has even created the 4F stamp in anticipation of excluding him. Indeed, rather than being an exceptional context, "militaries reflect the views of their underlying societies" regarding desirable physical functioning (Marble 2; 1) and, at the same time, expose disability as a contingent category created by whichever authority has the power to divide bodies into those deemed "fit" or "unfit" for exploitation: H. Mather Lippincott recalled that he was classed 4F in WWII partly because, at six-feet six-and-a-half-inches, he was too tall for the trenches of the *previous* World War (Lippincott 07:30-08:18).

However, the Captain America origin story locates disability firmly in Steve's defective body – which, on screen, belongs to actor Leander Deeny, with Chris Evans' head applied via CGI ('How Chris Evans'). Watching *First Avenger* with little prior knowledge of Marvel superheroes, I was dismayed that fighting fascism involved replacing a disabled body with a heroic blond, blue-eyed, muscular body which, like the drawings in the 1941 Captain America comic (Simon and Kirby 4-5), resembled the contrast between “fit” and “unfit” bodies on an American eugenic propaganda poster circulating in 1942 entitled *If You Are Fit to Marry* (see Cordel 100), or the Third Reich school textbook illustration of an Aryan man carrying two small, frail people on his shoulders, labelled *You Are Sharing a Load! A Hereditarily Ill Person Costs 50,000 Reichsmarks*. Unsurprisingly, Scott observes “the superhero arrived at the same time as Hitler's shadow version of the same in his vision of the ‘master race’” (76).

Rather than speculating unfairly on artist Jack Kirby's possible attitudes toward disability, I would highlight contemporary prejudices restricting the range of visual representations intelligible to his audience.² In the 1930s, the US government labelled Americans with physical impairments “unemployable” charity-cases, excluding them from work programmes even when they were demonstrably capable (Longmore and Goldberger 897), and tens of thousands of Americans were classed as “mentally or morally unfit to become parents”, and forcibly sterilised (“16,000 US Citizens Sterilized”).³ An impaired body could not represent national fantasies of self-reliance and physical courage.

² Weinstein (53), however, suggests Steve's Aryan appearance reflects Kirby and Simon's “desires for assimilation”, and Hack's critique is explicit.

³ Hansen and King (3) estimate at least 60,000 were sterilised by the 1970s.

Yet the comic also reminds us that forced sterilisation was only one facet of 1920s-40s US disability. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's decision to depict a disabled man as the raw material for their American hero aligns with President Roosevelt's cultivated public image of himself "as someone who had been paralyzed, but who had heroically overcome his affliction" (Pressman 328). Stein's observation that Roosevelt's prominence during the Great Depression inspired "a nation that desperately wanted to believe in miraculous recoveries in troubled times" (36) undoubtedly applied to Captain America in 1941. Although Steve's body required modification to become useful, at least his underlying moral worth was not questioned. That said, the first issue of the comic only allows us to glimpse Steve's original body on pages four and five before transforming it.

What of *First Avenger* in 2011? Vernon argues that its:

emphasis on representing women and people of color is not Captain America as it was in the 1940s comic book [...] Rather this is Captain America as one would like him to be, that is, a container for present sensibilities about inclusiveness and diversity. (126)

First Avenger, unlike the 1941 comic, emphasises Steve's physical courage even in his pre-transformation state (00:23:58). Nonetheless, while it (crudely) updates representation of other marginalised groups, the film's characterisation of pre-transformation Steve embittered by disability remains decidedly "retro", resembling twentieth-century "dramas of adjustment" which "put the responsibility for any problems squarely and almost exclusively on the disabled individual [...] Refusing to accept themselves with their handicap, they have chosen isolation" (Longmore 71). Steve sulks alone in the cinema, watching a newsreel that declares "every able-bodied young man is lining up to serve his country. Even little Timmy is doing his part collecting scrap metal. Nice work, Timmy!" (00:09:00). The newsreader obviously

uses a condescending tone because Timmy is a small child. However, Steve takes that tone personally; later, he argues with his nondisabled friend Sergeant Bucky Barnes:

Bucky: Why are you so keen to fight? There are so many important jobs!

Steve: What do you want me to do? Collect scrap metal in my little red wagon?

Bucky: Yes! Why not?

Steve: I'm not going to sit in a factory, Bucky. Bucky, come on. There are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them. That's what you don't understand. This isn't about me.

Bucky: Right. 'Cause you got nothing to prove. (00:13:12-00:13:30)

Steve presents the war contributions of non-combatants as ridiculous (a cartoonish “little red wagon”) or passive, as if munitions workers were “sitting” around waiting for nondisabled men to win the war. Analysing the bare script, rather than Evans’ earnest performance, exposes Steve’s statements as incoherent ejaculations, justifying Bucky’s retort that Steve is motivated by bitterness and vanity, and that his bad attitude (not structural discrimination) poisons his engagement with society.

This cliché of twentieth-century ableist drama *may* be complicated by pre-transformation Steve wanting to fight Nazis because “I don’t like bullies” (00:15:55). While Nazi persecution of disabled people is not discussed, Erskine implies that Steve’s status as “a weak man” motivates his resistance to fascism: in short, Erskine attributes to Steve some kind of “disability consciousness” (“Representation” 208). However, in other contexts, Steve distances himself from disability: even his abrupt, militarised description of his mother’s death – “She was a nurse in a TB ward. Got hit – couldn’t shake it” (00:08:27) – resists the

likelihood that she lived as a disabled person for many months or years with tuberculosis (Dormandy 22).

It is not unreasonable to expect this modern film to reflect more critically on American ableism, given that Marvel comic series *The Truth: Red, White, and Black* reimagined Captain America's relationship with racial injustice so thoroughly in 2003.

Carpenter found that:

Truth's respective editor, writer, and artist had the same comment about the White Captain America's premise: *the military would never have performed the super soldier experiments on a blonde haired, blue eyed white guy... at least not the more dangerous initial trials. And they cited the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments to support their contention. (51; Carpenter's emphasis)*

Truth therefore introduced the "true" original Captain America: a Black soldier, Isiah Bradley, who endures experimentation and exploitation before being erased from history and replaced by Steve Rogers. Without detracting from *Truth's* central premise that US democracy is built on the exploitation of African Americans (Wanzo 341), a story about non-consensual body modification also resonates with disability history, as tens of thousands of Americans labelled "feeble minded" were forcibly sterilised.⁴ In Nazi Germany many more were sterilised, and hundreds of thousands of disabled people were murdered (Burdett 38) but, like Disability scholars Mitchell and Snyder ("Eugenic Atlantic" 860), *Truth* emphasises this history to foreground similarities between US and Nazi abuses of marginalised groups, rather than to make the US seem benign by comparison. Isiah Bradley is sent to destroy a

⁴ Hansen and King (10) suggest that people of colour were not usually targeted for this procedure until after WWII.

laboratory in a Nazi extermination camp; confronted with the horrors within, he reflects on his orders: “‘Do not allow yourself to be distracted by whatever you may see’, they said”; “‘Do not consider what we did to you’, is what they didn’t say” (10-12).

By contrast, *First Avenger* fails to update and engage with Nazi atrocities publicised after the 1941 original (Jacobsen, location 1654). As if *Truth* had never been published, the film jokes lightly about human experimentation; Steve’s commanding officer tells scientist Erskine “when you brought a ninety-pound asthmatic onto my army base, I let it slide; I thought ‘what the hell? Maybe he’d be useful to you, like a gerbil” (00:22:05-00:22:11). Even Erskine’s attempt to politicise body modification is limited to his German homeland, telling Steve:

after the last war, my people struggled. They felt weak. They felt small. And then Hitler comes along with the marching and the big show and the flags. And he hears of me. My work. And he finds me. And he says [...] “You will make us strong”.
(00:24:04-00:25:10)

Steve is, we are assured, a very different test subject from his counterparts in (fictional) Nazi science-cult Hydra – despite their shared assumption that weak bodies should be modified and replaced. *First Avenger* depicts wartime US audiences thrilled by Captain America’s physical prowess, but never acknowledges similarities to German citizens thrilled by “the marching and the big show and the flags”. Alas, this evasion may be unwittingly historically accurate; a 1944 US study found that:

Many people may react negatively to the label “fascism” and yet accept the principles of fascism which the label would logically include; the embracing of fascist ideology

and the possession of fascist attitudes does not necessarily involve any recognition of their real nature. (Edwards 302)

Unlike *Truth, First Avenger* participates in a commonplace “narrative by historians [that] allows Germany to be effectively sealed off” from ableist, eugenic ideals actually shared across the Atlantic (“Eugenic Atlantic” 846; see Kühl 39; 98; 106), and repeats the evasion criticised by Morales’ Black Captain America: ““Do not consider what we did to you””.

Mutilation and disillusionment in *Winter Soldier*

The modern-day setting of *Winter Soldier*, based loosely on Ed Brubaker’s 2005 comic, imagines a horrifying logic of evolving military technology since Captain America was frozen in the Arctic in 1945. The real-world US military’s shift toward high-tech weaponry (Masters, 120-121) climaxes in *Winter Soldier* with airships designed to execute perceived enemies of the state pre-emptively in their millions. Furthermore, this film corrects the moral evasions of *First Avenger* by depicting the US haunted by the legacies of WWII human experimentation, embodied in the ghostly Winter Soldier.

Dauw (41) and Vernon point out that, frozen since 1945, Captain America functions in this film as an unsullied relic of “America’s greatest moral victory” (Vernon 126), while the Winter Soldier, frozen in WWII by Hydra but then defrosted repeatedly to perform assassinations, represents the inglorious ongoing grind “of American foreign intervention since the Cold War” (Vernon 130). This function is transposed onto their bodies, as Steve’s modification serves his heroic will, giving physical expression to his moral superiority (Erskine in *First Avenger* explained that “good becomes great”, 00:25:35). The soldier, by contrast, is presented as a muzzled, degraded vehicle for the mechanical arm welded into his

scarred flesh; the red star on his prosthesis identifies him as the relic of an abortive Cold War, simultaneously more futuristic than “Greatest Generation” Steve (00:16:48), and more obsolete, recalling hierarchies of disabled veterans discussed by Schalk – both in terms of privileging WWII veterans over later veterans (406) and privileging those whose disability is erased by technology over those more crudely, incompletely modified (412). Unlike Captain America’s perfect transformation, the Soldier’s physical and mental modifications require repeated, traumatic maintenance by technicians and, while Steve seems slightly larger, action sequences in which the Soldier drops onto cars emphasise the antique cyborg’s extraordinary weight, like an old Soviet tank (01:16:09). Furthermore, both enhanced soldiers predate (real) post-Vietnam expansion of military technology to distance personnel from physical danger (Masters 121) but, while Captain America fulfils nostalgic longing for old-fashioned heroism (modern soldiers are impressed when he jumps from a plane without a parachute, 00:04:55), the Winter Soldier’s enhancement simply increases his endurance of abuse: he somersaults onto the roof of a car and lands face-down with great force and no attempt to protect his own face from the impact (01:23:49).

Yet the real horror of the inhuman Winter Soldier is that he once *was* human – and American. His jumbled flashbacks show that, when Steve’s friend Bucky fell down a ravine to his death in *First Avenger*, his left arm was torn off; he was retrieved, brainwashed, and rebuilt as a cyborg assassin by Nazi/ Hydra scientists (later also operating under US and Soviet flags). By erasing his memories and lying to him about his purpose and his relationship with Steve (01:23:49-01:26:38), his abusive handlers deny him the Enlightenment conditions of personhood that the films emphasise in Steve: the capacity for human emotional bonds (Klages 17), and for rational autonomous judgement which makes people “ends in themselves” rather than mere objects (Kant 91; Arneil 224-225). The film’s

Enlightenment (or *Frankenstein*-esque) sensibility renders the Soldier a figure of terrible pathos: with the memory-wiping machine framing his head like a halo, the shirtless, long-haired, sad-faced young man is displayed as a martyred saint. His violation and victimhood are overdetermined aesthetically and morally.

For this sensibility, Steve's consent to modification represents a crucial difference between Captain America and the Winter Soldier. The contrast may be illuminated by contemporary discussions of female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS), typically sought by western adult women, and female genital mutilation (FGM), typically conducted on non-western women and minor girls. Physically, there is so much overlap that Berer in the *British Medical Journal* insists "the surgical procedures described [as FGCS] are all female genital mutilation", and should be prosecuted as such under English law (see Berer), but Braun explains that "[c]hoice and agency underpin the apparent ethical acceptability of [FGCS procedures], and work to render them fundamentally different from (unacceptable) 'traditional' forms of female genital cutting" (243). This dichotomy serves to reinforce westerners' self-image as autonomous agents (see Wade). So far, this seems an obvious parallel with Steve and the Winter Soldier, especially given Captain America's original function as a beacon of American liberty in contrast with totalitarian regimes elsewhere (Simon 8). Yet Braun goes on to point out that the dichotomy between western women "choosing" FGCS, and non-western women undergoing FGM supposedly as victims of cultural pressures, rests on the misconception that westerners are miraculously immune to cultural pressures (241), and Berer frankly describes the dichotomy as "racist" (Berer). Indeed, a clinical psychologist and a gynaecologist reveal that:

[n]ot unlike presenting for a haircut at a salon, women [seeking FGCS] often brought along images to illustrate the desired appearance. The illustrations, usually from

advertisements or pornography, are always selective and possibly digitally altered
(Lih Mei Liao and Creighton 1091)

These images are presumably manufactured to generate anxiety about natural physical variations and so prompt western women to “choose” surgery.

Surprisingly, these debates illuminate a similar false binary between Steve and the Soldier – although I will return to the use of manipulative images in a later section. Steve is introduced to the history of Operation Paperclip (01:01:10) – a real-life US military project that helped Nazi scientists evade trial at Nuremberg so the US could benefit from technologies developed via human experimentation and slave labour (Jacobsen, location 3514). Explicit references to Operation Paperclip erase the binary between bad Nazi/ good American experiments established in *First Avenger* and, rather than being a victim of brutal foreigners, the Soldier is revealed to be a product of America’s complicity with Nazi scientists.⁵ The film’s other twist is that the Soldier’s cruel Hydra commander is actually Steve’s commander, US Secretary Pierce. Both super-soldiers are therefore unwitting “fists of Hydra”, and it is telling that the same patriotic speech that Pierce uses to brainwash the Soldier in the film (01:25:20-01:25:29) seems to be addressed – quite seamlessly – to Captain America in one of the official trailers (Trailer 1).

⁵ In Brubaker’s 2005 *Winter Soldier* comic (no. 11), the Soviets *did* turn Bucky into the Soldier – hence the red star. In the films he is a product of Operation Paperclip, with some Russian handlers, and now controlled by a US politician. The fact that the Soldier is frozen between missions may allude to experiments conducted in Dachau, where doctors froze people and attempted to revive them (Jacobsen, location 1821).

Before these showy plot twists, the film hints at more insidious violations of Steve's personhood. VA councillor Sam Wilson asks Steve if he is "thinking about getting out" of his military career:

Steve: No. [*pauses*] I don't know. To be honest, I don't know what I would do with myself if I did.

Sam. Ultimate Fighting? Just a great idea off the top of my head! Seriously, you could do whatever you want to do. What makes you happy?

Steve: I don't know. (00:25:38-00:26:00)

Steve's reflex response is to deny his disillusionment, but he eventually admits that he has no idea what makes him happy: his desires were hijacked over seventy years ago. The audience participates in Steve's disorientation when he visits a Smithsonian museum exhibition about Captain America: the solemn, triumphant music which initially seems to be part of the film's non-diegetic score is revealed to be diegetic music playing in the museum, audible to Steve too – as if, having claimed his body as a piece of military technology, Steve's country will not allow him to process his war trauma without a patriotic soundtrack (00:17:22). Steve's grief and distress throughout this film shifts Captain America from the privileged category of soldiers whose physical impairments are eliminated by technology, to that of veterans whose permanently scarred cognitive and affective faculties deny a "disability-free" future (Schalk 410-11). Crucially, Steve ends his final showdown with the Winter Soldier not by triumphing, but by offering up his marvellous body to be destroyed by the cyborg: when he lies back and insists "you're my friend" and the brainwashed Soldier replies flatly "you're my mission", and continues beating him to death, Steve embraces the failure of everything his body was manufactured to represent (01:54:21-01:54:30).

Back to disability futures in *First Avenger*

Just as Claverie's initial viewing of *The Dark Knight* "read [Morgan] Freeman's character as 'explicitly positive, but latently racist,'" I saw Steve's transformation in *First Avenger* as explicitly positive, but latently ableist. Yet Claverie was forced to reassess his initial interpretation:

to account for the possibility that black spectators could approach the film not braced to resist its hegemonic meanings, but [...] to look for contradictions, seeking oppositional potential in seemingly hegemonic texts (160)

Similarly, after seeing *Winter Soldier*'s exposure of Steve's exploitation, I looked back at *First Avenger* and found some acknowledgement of that process by which his choices were shaped by cultural pressures. Despite its ableist plot and dialogue, the film maintains a quiet, persistent exposure of historical ableism – often literally in the background.

The film's elaborate period sets surround Steve with military recruitment materials that insist upon the inadequacy of his body. The list of medical conditions rendering Steve ineligible for service appears to be a pre-prepared, typed sheet with boxes to tick, and there is a larger version on the wall of Erskine's examination room (00:15:23), showing that the military invented these categories of valid and invalid bodies, and printed, circulated, and displayed these lists even before they began examining recruits. We are first introduced to Steve in a recruitment office where men are forced to undress together, exposing his physical inferiority. In a backstreet brawl with a larger man, he is rescued by Bucky, resplendent in his sergeant's uniform, while Steve's oversized shirt collar implies that manufacturers simply do not produce clothes for men his size. Bucky then takes Steve on a double date at a science fair where both girls cling to Bucky and ignore Steve, their attention fixed on "the Modern

Marvels Pavilion, and the World of Tomorrow. A greater world. A better world”. Evidently, Steve does not belong in that future; when he reaches between the group to offer his date a bag of peanuts, she rejects him with unconcealed disgust (00:09:29-00:11:49). Alone again, Steve steps up to a recruitment poster which has a mirror in place of the soldier’s face, enabling men to see their own faces reflected there – only to be reminded, again, that he is too small to be visible (00:12:48).

These details indicate that Steve is not a bitter, paranoid invalid handicapped only by his “negative attitude”: he is, in fact, bombarded with material evidence that his society wants to exclude him from its marvellous disability-free future; his repeated visits to recruitment offices and “the World of Tomorrow” recall Lih Mei Liao and Creighton’s account of women collecting images of improbably perfect vulvas (1091). These details open up an ostensibly ableist film to Braun’s observation that “[i]n a context where the individual *should* be a (self-improving) agentic subject, choice rhetoric simultaneously promotes FGCS as a (viable) consumer ‘choice’ to ‘improve’ what is simultaneously being (re)constructed as problematic” (244). Similarly, the very existence of 4F stamps and all the recruitment materials problematise the diversity of human bodies, steering the autonomous agent towards the only rational choice: modification and elimination.

As Vernon points out, the montage in which newly-transformed Steve performs USO shows (00:46:24-00:49:50) “calls into question the origins of the Captain America character as both a form of entertainment and a propaganda tool” (125). Yet this is not just war propaganda: it is “ablenationalist” propaganda wherein “excessive displays of body supplementation are trafficked globally as signs of the completion (even transcendence) of the limitations of disabled bodies” (Mitchell and Snyder, *Biopolitics*, 36). Steve’s utter

mortification at being ordered to display his spectacular new body to unmodified soldiers suffering the physical realities of war represents another strand of self-reflective disability critique.

Finally, *First Avenger* also introduces Bucky as a small critical voice – although, yet again, this function becomes more apparent after witnessing his traumatic modification in *Winter Soldier*. Not only does Bucky enthuse over disabled people’s contributions to the war effort (“so many important jobs!”), but he is also the only person in *First Avenger* to ask whether Steve’s transformation might come at some cost: “Did it hurt?” (01:02:10). Indeed, a peculiar flashback in *Winter Soldier* projects Bucky’s thoughtful attitudes to disability back in time before Steve’s transformation. In a Depression-era New York devoid of futuristic technology – the a backdrop of drab clothes on washing-lines, and sepia-toned, decaying tenement buildings contrasting with the metallic blue tone of contemporary scenes – Bucky asks Steve to live with him and help keep house, presumably while he goes to work:

Bucky: It’ll be fun. All you gotta do is shine my shoes, maybe take out the trash...

Steve: Thank you Buck, but I can get by on my own.

Bucky: Thing is... you don’t have to. [*grips his shoulder*] I’m with you to the end of the line, pal. (01:28:38-01:29:29)

Bucky’s longing for connection, sharing, and *interdependence* challenges the reverence for *independence* driving not only modern neoliberal ableism, but also a lot of twentieth-century Disability Rights discourse. Longmore and Goldberger’s research on the League of the Physically Handicapped, active in New York (like Steve and Bucky) in the mid-1930s, shows disabled people who were capable of employment distanced themselves from the cultural role of “dependent cripple” against which “independent able-bodied” men defined themselves

(912). Yet, in the same era, Bucky rejects his own “independent able-bodied” status when he asks a disabled man to take care of *him*, undermining the false binary of disabled-dependent/nondisabled-independent (see Penketh 63). Bucky envisions a committed future together, in which interdependence makes technological modifications irrelevant – in poignant contrast with the contemporary storyline in which their weaponised bodies are pitched in competition and mutual destruction.

Winter Soldier suggests Steve’s complicated relationship with that alternative disability future he lost in *First Avenger*: an early scene in which Sam asks Steve if he misses “the good old days”, and Steve replies lightheartedly that “no polio is good”, sounds like an uncomplicated endorsement of progress – but, rewatching with more understanding of Steve’s trauma, Evans’ droll delivery makes these endorsements of modernity feel like a practiced spiel designed to censor Steve’s ambivalence and grief from these public encounters (00:02:15). In his final showdown with the brainwashed Soldier, Steve tries to remind him of his past self by repeating Bucky’s phrase “I’m with you to the end of the line”, but he is also recalling them both to that interdependent disability future Bucky once envisioned. Indeed, only when Steve surrenders his marvellous body to potential destruction and falls into the river can the couple finally reconnect – in a slow underwater scene resembling the famous romantic sequence in 1934 French film *L’Atalante*, where a lonely husband jumps into the canal to glimpse a vision of his estranged bride underwater. *Winter Soldier* recreates this “retro” cinematic allusion to similar effect/ affect, as the exploding military hardware above is silenced by water and by the delicate acoustic score, and the Soldier’s ghostly silver hand reaches out to rescue Steve in the murky depths (01:55:00-30).

After the Soldier drags him ashore, Steve wakes in a (modern) hospital without him, and this “retro” moment of reconnection feels like a lost dream. Indeed, the sequel *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) strenuously resists opportunities to explore alternative (and potentially queer) disability futures, as if terrified by what the previous film implied. Another character who experiences a spinal cord injury is next seen walking in robotic leg braces. Fantastical trigger words, and vague allusions to futuristic technology removing Hydra’s Winter Soldier programming from Bucky’s brain, constitute a dogged refusal to represent a character (surely?) living with brain injury and PTSD. Disability is excised from the plot like an inconvenient tumour. And yet, once *Winter Soldier* has alerted us to the form his critique will take, Bucky himself continues to function as a small voice of protest in the midst of this strident ableism. In *Black Panther* (2018), Bucky has apparently eschewed prosthetics and been working on a farm peacefully as a one-armed man. When another superhero presents Bucky with a new prosthesis in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), in what should be a triumphant moment of rehabilitation, Bucky looks devastated; rather than thanking his benefactor, he just asks, softly, “Where’s the fight?” (00:57:04). The words in the script may celebrate weaponisation, but Sebastian Stan’s performance exudes resignation and despair.

Conclusion

Even if the MCU as a whole celebrates “profitable” neoliberal narratives of body modification (Grue 3), ongoing expansion makes it harder for Marvel to prevent these fragments of critical disability representation emerging from the gaps and contradictions. Perhaps the MCU’s biggest “error” was inserting this unruly cyborg veteran to reinforce Captain America’s perfection in the first place: the ableist SF films discussed by Schalk evidently avoid such chaotic characters for a good reason. Bucky continues to disrupt ableist narratives in *The Falcon and Winter Soldier* (2021) television series, as the extended form

and “buddy” genre makes it impossible to keep evading personal and interpersonal implications of his traumatic backstory. When he misses a session of “court-mandated therapy”, a police officer explains “it’s like missing a check-in with your [parole officer]” (Episode 2, 31:57), exposing popular mistrust of veterans with PTSD and/ or traumatic brain injury as “as expensive, potentially dangerous liabilities” (Schalk 406). Bucky’s misgivings about official attempts to correct, eliminate, or weaponise his disability are too integral to his character, and to the ongoing logic of his function in the text, to be extinguished.

Perhaps more important than the content of official media is the critical relationship audiences form with that content. On 13 March 2021, fanworks platform *Archive of Our Own* (AO3) carried 766 fanworks on the *Captain America* movies using “Disability” as a tag – but, more interestingly, 162 fanworks were tagged “Ableism”. All but four entered the archive after *Winter Soldier* was released in March/ April 2014; sixty four in this period use the tag “Ableist language”. Of course there will be significant overlap, with some fanworks using all three tags, but the allusion to ableism rather than simply disability suggests some kind of politicised consciousness in these fans’ characterisation of Bucky and/ or Steve, and a critical reflection on the characters’ social experiences rather than uncritical celebration of ableist superhero narratives.

My own analysis has identified hints of disability critique in the films themselves, but subsequent research may investigate whether MCU fanworks are engaging with different details, or whether fan creators see themselves as “correcting” a lack of disability critique in this particular source material. More detailed research may also reveal how these creators perceive their engagement/ correction in relation to their own politics and identities. Indeed, my own research began when I saw Dauw deliver a conference paper in 2015 on the

conservative ideology of superhero representations of the masculine body – and I realised that the flourishing of superb queer and critical disability fanworks proves that, in some sense, the films’ ableist, heteronormative propaganda always carries the seeds of its own undoing.

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