Wealth, Power, American Dream, Iron Man

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ABSTRACT

The darkened theatre is where our imaginations come to life, a place we all go to escape. American audiences have sought out movies since the beginning of the twentieth century. The superhero emerged first in comic books, and later transferred to film. While conforming to genre norms, the Iron Man films convey meanings and beliefs of dominant culture. These values established in Iron Man offer a view of class, gender, sex, and race. These values are viewed and explained through the lens of contemporary capitalism.
Heroes are not born. They are built. (Favreau, Iron Man, 2008)

**Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to analyze two popular box office hits, *Iron Man I* and *Iron Man II*, laying bare the cultural themes and ideology prevalent in these Hollywood superhero films. The goal is to explore the values established in the film medium allowing for a better understanding of each of the films. The creation of film is a collaboration of artistic vision and incorporation of cultural norms providing within the film texts the story which often mirrors actual cultural practices. These mirrored practices can provide a venue for communication that would help discern cultural beliefs and ideals.

Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, gender, sex, and class, but they also provide a shared experience, a common staring point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues (hooks, 1996). The discourse that is created in the Iron Man films conveys the ideals of capitalism in a hegemonic white male dominated society. Continuance of these ideals establishes an oppressive discourse in Iron Man films and with other superheroes in film. Examining what superheroes represent in society, this critical lens then becomes an interaction between film and audience, breaking down the created perceptions and making space for a deeper, richer understanding.
Review of Literature

The phenomenon of superheroes is not only prevalent in post 9/11 histories; the superhero and accompanying ideology can be traced back as early as June 1938 with the appearance of superheroes in American newsstands of Action Comics 1, featuring Superman (Reynolds, 1994). The creation of the comic book superhero can be linked to the economic and social turmoil of the 1920’s (Coogan, 2006; Dipaolo, 2011; Dittmer, 2011). A pattern of superheroes in relation to war, peace and economic turmoil of the times develops. Social and historical factors play an important role in the comparison and contrast of different works. The nature of film has drawn on elements in our lives that connect audiences to the films; these realistic elements give creditability to the characters and situations. The traumatic events of 9/11 gave strength to the superhero film, providing security and escapism for audience as well as identifiable heroes and villains.

Propaganda as Film

While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose [the message], also true are certain “received” messages that are rarely mediated by the will of the audience (hooks, 1996). Through the identification of the characters in the film, audiences are offered a chance to escape through the visual medium. The bombardment of powerful images and continuity is pleasurable to audiences. The pleasure of
watching these moving images has been a pastime of audiences around the world since from the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the case of the superhero movie, we transcend our own human frailties going to a fantasy world where we do not have to be grounded by the realities of our particular lives by delving into a world that’s created for us, transforming ourselves into that hero, with amazing abilities and power. This highlights the power and mysticism of film. Film has an ability to mimic reality giving way to believing the images are real. These real images instruct our lives, establishing and reinforcing widely held assumptions of dominant society. Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in our lives. Teaching may not be the intent of the filmmaker, but that does not mean that lessons are not being learned (hooks, 1996). Hooks (1996) further asserts that movies are more than just entertainment: Within each film are tools for learning about race, class, gender, sex, and culture.

The persuasive film medium and its correlation with war demonstrate that a society in crisis needs a hero to re-establish order. This becomes obvious with the resurgence of the superhero film since in the film text we see the exploitation of an easy enemy and reliance on stereotypes maintaining class, gender and sex ideas, as well as the use of power in film where these texts provide an understanding that a simple escape from reality can be problematic. This film (Iron Man) becomes problematic in its
ability to easily identify racial others as enemies, as Stam and Spence (1985) describe, “Difference is transformed in ‘other’-ness and exploited or penalized by and for power (p.635).” The films of Iron Man are not the only offenders of this power struggle in films. The superhero film conforms to a set of rules, creating a common and easy understanding of the film.

**Film Genre**

Defining any genre requires the knowledge of established convention that creates the genre (Coogan, 2006). Although conventions vary between genres, repetition constitutes the convention and the genre. We are all familiar with genre, it is the main reason we seek out certain types of movies. Kolker (2006) states that it is the “blueprint” for which movies are made, once the pattern is established; it is easier and cheaper to create many movies of the same type. Genres are also not pure in form, many genres cross over into each other creating a “complex interlocking (p.719)” (Wood, 1986). When it comes to the superhero film, the elements that construct the storyline mirror the elements in the western. This can be seen in the wandering hero such as John Wayne made iconic in many westerns. The superhero film seems to carry on that same ideal with the hero. Genre construction relies on generic ways to create a story. Wood (1977) and other authorities on genre theory assert the development of a genre is not free of ideological practices; the elements that construct it have been established in our collective cultural understanding. Because of the genre conventions, the structures of
the storyline have audiences returning because of familiarity and the fulfilling of their expectations of the story.

**American Capitalist Ideology**

Wood’s (1977) writing served to establish a central concept of American capitalist ideology, which will serve as the methodology here to interpret the superhero films *Ironman I and II* (1977). Wood (1977) defines American capitalist ideology as being “the values and assumptions so insistently embodied in and reinforced by the classical Hollywood cinema“ (p. 718). The amalgamation of three film theories helps “see the work as wholly as possible.” (p.717) (Wood, 1977) This process to see the film as a whole work instead of several parts provides the foundation for the theory of American Capitalist ideology. The application of individual theories for analysis created a “particular polarization” viewing of the films. The multiple voices that collaborate in the making of the film were excluded from analysis. (p.717) (Wood, 1977)

Wood’s (1977) American capitalist ideology theory takes voice from these three theories Marxist, auteur and genre. Through this consolidation the balance between each is created, allowing for a more compressive view of any given film. The theory of Marxism offers an economic and sociopolitical worldview to facilitate a critique on capitalism providing an ideology that is connected with each film. The next aspect of Wood’s (1977) theory is the incorporation of the auteur theory. The auteur theory provides an explanation of authorship. It is here that we saw the creative reflection of
the director in the film; the director is the author. This then brings us to genre. Genre, in itself, provides a formulaic pattern that the structure of the narrative follows. Through genre the categorization of cinematic elements emerge allowing for conventions of the each genre to help tell the story. Each of these theories on their own offer insights into the cinematic viewing of the any movie, yet in combination, they comprehensively enrich our pleasure in the watching of films offering a deeper understanding.

The analysis of the Iron Man films and their forms, and the “deconstruction” of the texts, reveals the embedding of the ideological principals in the films. Thinking in a constructive way about accountability never diminishes artistic integrity or an artistic vision; rather it strengthens and enhances (Kolker, 2006).

Critical Theory

Finally, critical theory offers an introspective lens looking at privilege and power in our daily lives. Through these dual forces of privilege and power, the world is understood, along with our communication. The questioning of privilege and power has assumed importance in communication theory, and this critical tradition takes on the challenge of exploring the relationship between privilege, power, and culture.

Critical theory offers further help in understanding the film texts of Iron Man I and II. It establishes important points of reference of commonly held beliefs and assumptions by the audience. Through this interaction, Foss (2008) states, “is the process and site in which meaning, roles, rules and cultural values are worked out” (pp.
Critical theory posits the inquiry of race, religion, sex, gender, and class and their relationship within broader culture. “Through the uncovering of oppressive social conditions and power arrangements,” (pp. 43-44) viewing film changes our conscious and subconscious experiences. Critically looking at film and other forms of art is to identify oppression and dispel it, along with the “illusion of ideology” to become active audiences better able to fully enjoy the film as art.

Cinema provided an arena for looking at and understanding cultural norms and established ideal. In this review, the author explained and identified theories and concepts, which in combination inform and provide a foundation for a close analysis of the Iron Man films.

**Method and Analysis**

The foundation of textual analysis is utilized in many film theories. Film theories provided a film language as well as an understanding of the components that make up the film. These components include the shot, which is an unedited, uncut, length of film, and the mise-en-scene which is the use of the space within the frame, such as the placement of the actors and props, the relationship of the camera to the space in front, camera movement, the use of color or black and white, lighting, and the size of the screen frame itself. All of these devices affect the audience emotionally and visually, allowing for the embedding of ideological beliefs.
Wood (1977) looked at classical Hollywood films while applying twelve concepts that serve as central themes in analyzing movies. These concepts include: Capitalism, work ethic, marriage and family, nature, progress and technology, the rosebud syndrome, America the land of the free, ideal male, ideal female, passive male, and the erotic female. These themes help define American capitalist ideology, bringing attention to the importance and focus of values that are created in dominant society. Capitalist society is disproportionate in its stance that relies on the need for possession, money, family, and the subordination of nature, creating a polarized truth of good and bad.

The use of Wood’s (1977) framework helps to understand the films of Iron Man I & II. Wood (1977) states that “to be able to draw on the discoveries and particular perceptions of each theory, each position, without committing themselves exclusively to anyone” (p. 717), the themes help to understand how through the adherence or denial of the theme the story is derived.

Studies have always sought predictability, and the classic studio system relied on stars and genres to encourage the audience to return for more of what it liked. But as film attendance waned, producers looked for other models (Thompson, 2011). In the films of Iron Man, Obadiah Stane (villain) wants to obtain control and power, while Ivan Vanko in Iron Man II wants revenge for his father. The use of mise-en-scene helps to convey the message of dominance of man over nature; the dominant person is the one who possess the technology. Not only does the narrative support that message, but it is
also enhanced through the mise-en-scene. Stark’s headquarters and his suit are all technological advances that others do not possess. The use of these films, as seen through the American capitalist lens, allows for the appropriation of these values and assumptions, establishing that advanced technology equates to superior intelligence.

**Film Texts**

*Iron Man I* appeared in theatres in May 4, 2008, with opening day sales and overall box office gross opening weekend earnings coming in at $102,118,668 in the United States. *Iron Man* went on to gross: $585,174,222 worldwide. Numbers alone do not speak to the popularity and success of *Iron Man*. The serial nature of the superhero films provides writers, producers and directors with enough material for many storylines. The need to critically look at the *Iron Man* films stems from understanding that these films in their popularity and serial nature serve as a learning tool. *Iron Man* films have incorporated, in each of the films, texts and ideological underpinnings; it utilizes the framework of Robin Wood’s American Capitalist Ideology, and these themes become highlighted within the film text. This extrapolation allows for them to be analyzed for further discussion.

**Iron Man**

When wealthy industrialist Tony Stark is forced to build an armored suit after a life-threatening incident, he ultimately decides to use its technology to fight against evil. The movie *Iron Man* plays out like all the movies in the superhero genre; holding true to
the genre’s conventions of the dichotomies of good and evil and ultimately resolves things in the end. It is in Iron Man that we see the ideological factors that construct the superhero tale which allows the fulfillment of the superhero genre as well as Hollywood’s maintaining of the capitalist ideal.

Iron Man II

Iron Man II released in 2010, continues with the Iron Man story. Produced by Marvel studios and distributed by Paramount pictures, the Iron Man II sequel places the story six months after the end of the first Iron Man beginning with the confession that Tony Stark is Iron man. Stark now faces the challenge of keeping his armored suit in his possession and a new villain Ivan Vanko who seeks to destroy Stark/Iron man.

Wood’s (1977) first theme of capitalism includes the related concept of ownership. Dominant ideology in the United States encourages ownership, whether it is private property or collective, be it land or intellectual property. These ideals play out in both Iron Man films through the protagonist Tony Stark (played by Robert Downy Jr.), the owner of Stark Industries, a corporation specializing in making weapons for the United States military. The images of Stark’s lifestyle connect ownership, private enterprise and personal initiative to that of wealth and success, and autonomy. Throughout both films capitalism is maintained and adhered to by Stark. One of the scenes that helped to communicate the connection to capitalism to Stark is a scene in which he was receiving
an award for his duty to his country. The long shot of the audience provides the context of an award ceremony, as the announcer’s voice narrates a series of images. The scene changes to incorporate still shots of Stark, showing the progression of the young boy growing up into a billionaire genius. During this sequence, Stark’s intelligence, hard work, and success are highly regarded. The series of images directly link each of the concepts under capitalism, ownership, personal initiative and private enterprise. These are the values that are accepted and needed to achieve success. The films of *Iron Man I* & *II* also convey capitalist ideals for success by presenting the villain, who lacks all the capitalist acclaimed traits of achieving success. The ideals of wealth and intelligence construct Stark and proof of his success is also what defines the enemy. This is seen in *Iron Man II* where Ivan Vanko has the intelligence; but not the money, and Justin Hammer has the money but not the intelligence. The establishment of these ideals in Stark helps to realize that money and intelligence are the traits needed for success as defined by capitalism.

Wood’s (1977) second theme of work ethic places a moral connection to the relation of work according to Wood. Through hard work and diligence you are a morally sound person. The narrative presents Stark as a womanizer, who drinks and gambles and has a disregard for others. Being contrary to dominant norms, the need to resolve Stark’s work ethic becomes a fixture within the film text, and a pattern emerges where we see the motivation for transformation. The realization of how morally “out of
balance” his character is, comes through other characters in the narrative. The work ethic theme plays an important part of the narrative; it drives the transformation of Tony Stark. Additionally, the work ethic connects to Stark’s realization that his ethic is only realized through his allies, who are all characters of color. First, we see the connection with Lt. Col. Rhodes and Stark. Rhodes as Stark’s best friend serves as a moral compass for Stark in both films. Then Yinsen helps the morally corrupt Stark to see the way, and, finally, Nick Fury continues this guidance in both films. They all serve to direct Tony Stark to the values that are held by the dominant culture, these values that need to be maintained within the culture through the protagonist.

Wood’s (1977) third theme marriage (legal heterosexual monogamy) and family is one the most acknowledged of all themes in Hollywood films. Marriage in many films is connected to the happy endings of Wood’s eighth theme which is America land of the free where all things are possible. The marriage and family theme warrants comment in both films but never comes to fruition. The relationship between Stark and Potts, his assistant, develops over the course of both films. Stark embodies all the traits that are contrary to Wood’s themes only to have them resolved within the narrative, due to the series nature of the superhero film, the resolution of these themes may take several films to develop. Yensin, a fellow prisoner, says that he is a man who has everything, yet nothing. The dialogue suggests that without marriage and family, the man is nothing. Because of the serial nature of genre films, the ideal of marriage may
not have been resolved in either of these films, which holds out hope that it can be resolved in future films.

Wood’s (1977) fourth theme of nature is divided into two parts: “nature as agrarianism” and “nature as the wilderness” (p. 718). For the purposes of this research, I utilize the central tenet, the subjugation of the land. The positioning of the opening scene in Afghanistan foregrounds Tony Stark/Iron Man’s enemy in the film. Although this is a sleight of hand by the director creating a pseudo-enemy in the film, later it will be revealed that the real enemy of Iron Man is ultimately Obadiah Stane (played by Jeff Bridges), Stark’s business partner. The land plays an important part in establishing the location and a point of reference in which intelligence and advanced superiority are established. The theme of established intelligence and wealth is exhibited in the placement of people and land in the film. Stark resides in the thriving and high tech home in the city of Malibu, California. Since Stark is the example of intelligence and wealth. The enemy resides in barren miles of desert in the Kunar province, Afghanistan. The contrast between the city and the desert plays to the ideal that the dominance of the land equates to superiority.

The connection with the fifth theme of Wood’s (1977) of Progress, technology, the city; Iron Man is the epitome of progress and technology, and within the film this ideal is overtly extolled. The person who possesses the best, most advanced technology holds the power. The first Iron Man introduced this understanding in the monologue of Raza,
Stark’s captor, stating that the person who possesses the advanced technology is the person who has the power.

Wood’s sixth theme of success and wealth is shown as the goal of modern society. This theme, much like the other themes, refers to power. The goal of the villain and the hero is maintaining power and wealth, and, in the film, is directly connected to *Iron Man*. Power and wealth is the goal of capitalism.

The seventh theme is what Wood (1977) describes as the rosebud syndrome: Money is not everything. Money corrupts; the poor are happier. Within the films of both Iron Man I & II, clearly, the rich and powerful are happier, and from their happiness comes their success.

The eighth theme America is the land where everyone is or can be happy. *America is the land of the free*, with happy endings and where problems can be solved within the existing story. The films of *Iron Man* often concluded with the situation where the good guy beats the bad guy, and the good guy gets the girl. These films give that most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomena, the happy ending.

Wood’s (1977) last themes have been condensed for this analysis. In the *ideal male/shadow* theme, Wood describes the ideal man as being the virile adventurer and the man of action. This description is very suitable to Stark/Iron Man. Wood (1977) establishes that “the shadow is described to be the settled husband, dependable but
dull” (p. 719). Taking into consideration that Robert Downy Jr. embodies two characters in the films, there should be two ideals and two shadows, the ideals would be Tony Stark and Iron Man, thus creating the shadows. The shadow for Tony Stark in the film would be his best friend James Rhodes, and the shadow of Iron Man would Obadiah Stane (Iron Man I) and Ivan Vanko (Iron Man II).

Conclusion

Every popular movie can be read as taking the pulse of the public mood or the national unconscious (Thompson, 2011). The films in this time of post 9/11 Americanism, offers an interesting conclusion to understanding why all these films are coming out now. The audience yearns for a hero, but what are we really getting in a hero? Kolker (2006) states that:

We have to be conscious of everything in every film. To be lulled by the classical continuity style in a trance of identification with light and shadow on the white screen is not useful. Assenting to the ideology of the invisible may be relaxing, but in an important way, it is not safe (p. 43).

The narrative relied on all of Wood’s themes and displaying the contrary only to have them resolved over the course of the film. Correcting the status quo is what gives the plot fuel to keep going. These films do not pretend to be anything other than entertainment, yet the themes above point to the danger lying in, not fully acknowledging the images and their meaning: That we as an audience consent to them.
Through the twin forces of genre and ideology, we see patterns emerge in the film text. These themes explore the interactional worlds in which people live, positing that reality is not an objective set of arrangements outside us, but constructed through process of interaction in groups, communities, and cultures (Foss, 2008). The Iron Man films rely on adhering to the conventions of the superhero genre. Throughout the narrative, the director attempts at rupturing the conventions and through this rupture attains to other established values of capitalism, work ethic, and marriage. The films of Iron Man are not free of any form ideologies.

Genre helps to establish conventions that create an easy formulaic format for films to follow. The success of a film demonstrates these structures that work with audiences, and the structure is then used in such a way that the superhero films have become a genre, creating a formulaic structure for the films of that particular time, ethic, and perceived cultural value. The use of this structure helps to create easy stories for the audiences to consume. When we look to the movies to experience something extraordinary, what we often do not acknowledge are the assumptions and values that have constructed the film.
References:


