

Supervillains: A Reflection of Terrorists

Received: January 21, 2021 / Received in revised form: May 28, 2021 / Accepted: July 20, 2021

Nuttawuthi Nakong

Preeda Akarachantachote

Abstract

In recent years, superhero films have dominated the global film market. Film, as a form of media, proves an efficacious communication tool. In addition, Hollywood has been overt in its use of terrorism in storytelling. Thus, a nuanced comprehension of the relationship between film and terrorism is crucial. Despite a significant amount of literature on this and related topics, only a few studies have managed to establish a clear relativity between terrorists and those posing violent threats in superhero films, the supervillains. This article, therefore, intends to forge a strong bond between supervillains and Terrorists. By utilizing concepts regarding terrorist's ideologies, weapons, and prevalent terrorism myths by Richard Jackson and his colleagues in a textual analysis of six films [Avengers: Age of Ultron, Captain America: Civil War, Black Panther, Avengers: Infinity War & Endgame, and Aquaman], profound implications between these two are revealed. These implications further disclose the supervillains' internal ideological conflicts and nuances, mythologies inherent to their usage of terrorist weapons, and the hierarchy of their powers; all of which could address both infallible and flawed understandings of current literature on the topic.

Keywords: Critical Terrorism, Portrayal of Terrorists, Superhero Films, Supervillains

Nuttawuthi Nakong (BFA in Screenwriting, New York Film Academy, 2016. Email: n.nuttawuthi@gmail.com) is a graduate student of the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University. Preeda Akarachantachote (Ph.D. Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University) is an Associate Professor at Chulalongkorn University and the current dean of the Faculty of Communication Arts.

This article is a part of a dissertation on "Romantic Reflection of Terrorists in Superhero Movies" by Nuttawuthi Nakong, conducted under the supervision of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Preeda Akarachantachote. The dissertation received a very good assessment upon the final defense.

Introduction

According to a 2019 survey, terrorism pales in comparison with other worldwide causes of death (Ritchie, 2019). Terrorism, however, has never been closer to us. The cases of Samuel Paty in France, the Jolo bombings in The Philippines, and the Vienna Attack have proven that terrorism remains prevalent in 2020, even with the covid-19 pandemic rendering almost the entire world dormant. Thailand is no exception. The Korat Shootings shed light on a widely neglected security issue in the country; with modern communicative technology, both civilians and news agencies were capable of broadcasting this horrific incident live which enabled remote viewers to not only observe the event from afar but almost to participate in it. This marks a remarkable yet concerning competency modern media possesses, which begs a question; if this form of media possesses this much influence during a real live event, what about other forms that are independent of a real-world event but with the autonomy and power to fabricate an entire event, such as film? Or to be precise, a superhero film.

Since the occurrence of 9/11, an increased number of movie adaptations from superhero comics has indicated that this is not a coincidence (Treat, 2009). In fact, the use of terrorism in Hollywood movie production is rather explicit because terrorism tends to interest the audience. From the 1960s on, terrorism has become a global concern grabbing international attention; it serves as a potential source of stories, imaginations, and myths full of violence, exotic places, and good-vs-evil conflict. In other words, a perfect movie material (Boggs & Pollard, 2006). Superhero films are, of course, no exception to this practice. For instance, the climax of *The Avengers* (a Marvel's film

released in 2012) portrays a scene mimicking the destruction of New York city. In the scene, the city is invaded by "aliens" demolishing "skyscrapers". This imitation of 9/11 engages with the audience's memory of the event, evoking past sentiments of the incident (VanDerWerff, 2016). What is more intriguing is the global success of these superhero films. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) has become the most financially successful film of all time since its initial release with a total worldwide gross of over 2.7 billion dollars (Box Office Mojo, 2018); this indicates the immense popularity, outreach, and impact of these films, which has drawn scholars to take an interest in this particular subject matter.

Most prevalent literature, however, have had different aims when studying superhero films' societal implications, whether they be portrayal, meaning, or discourse. However, they are of the same conclusion: the image of terrorists represented in supervillains appears problematic and inaccurate; these supervillains often exhibit immorality, mental disorders, flat motivations, or simplistic ideologies all of which perpetuate widespread misperceptions and myths regarding terrorists. Namely, they depict a dehumanized representation of terrorists. On the other hand, in recent years, superhero movies have been produced with supervillains whose desires are more sympathetic and actions more empathetic. Their ideologies and goals are derivative of contemporary societal issues and values. Furthermore, as suggested by a 2014 psychological study that terrorist images retain a considerable impact on the public's political opinion, especially in democratic societies where citizens hold much influence on policy making (Iyer et al, 2014). This is where narratology and characterization express their true potential. Not only narratives disguise ideologies,

political conflicts, and power struggles with entertainment, but compelling stories and characters can also implant certain ideas in the audience's mind and shape their attitudes. Thus, a close analysis on narratives and characters will disclose the mechanism of power manipulation hiding underneath films. This paper, hence, will explore this differing aspect of supervillains by focusing on the recent commercially successful superhero films released by the two major production houses, Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment, in the past five years. These films include *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War & Endgame*, and *Aquaman*.

In this textual analysis, both traditional terrorism studies approach and critical terrorism studies approach are integrated in order to examine 5 supervillains; Ultron, Baron Zemo, Killmonger, Thanos, and Marius. First, the concepts regarding terrorist's ideologies, concerned with traditional terrorism studies, are utilized to scrutinize these supervillains and provide a micro explanation, at an individual level, of ideological causes behind their use of violence. These terrorists' ideologies include (1) secular terrorism ideologies consisting of rightism and leftism and (2) religious terrorism ideology. Then, the concepts regarding terrorists' weapons are employed to determine inherent mythologies and the differences in their power scales, violence measures, and the plausible scopes of casualty. Lastly, the concepts regarding myths revolving around terrorists, concerned with critical terrorism studies, are applied to see whether supervillains perpetuate or demystify these misunderstandings. As Richard Jackson conceptualized in his book, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*, there are three common myths persisting in the media, politics, and

academic spheres. These myths include (1) the belief that poverty causes terrorism, (2) the belief that psychological deviance cause terrorism, and (3) the belief that religion is a primary cause of terrorism and religion-inspired perpetrators are more violent and radical (Jackson et al, 2011). After all these aspects of terrorists are explored, a reflective conclusion is provided to highlight how the current terrorist portrayal in superhero films may have shifted from what recent literature has concluded.

The entanglement of ideologies

In this section, the ideological similarities between supervillains and terrorists are examined. Not only we will explore ideologies, but we will also peer deeper into the roots of these ideologies and their complications and implications on both modern society and real-world terrorists. Before venturing into the realm of thoughts and beliefs, a mutual understanding of terrorist ideologies must, first, be established.

Despite displaying areas of problem, the current methodology we employ to categorize terrorist ideologies still undeniably functions well when approaching the basic concepts. Therefore, this paper will approach supervillain's ideologies by utilizing the concepts of secular terrorism and religious terrorism. Secular terrorism is often divided into two dichotomies, leftism and rightism. The most prominent characteristic of leftism is its goals which regard societal changes such as the elimination of racial discrimination and oppression, the abandonment of old traditions, equality between social classes, dissolution of governing bodies, or even the achievement of an ultimate anarchist or communist society. On the contrary, rightism distinguishes itself from leftism by seeking

to maintain social hierarchy and traditions, the establishment of a single racial supremacy, or even the total eradication of other races. Lastly, religious terrorism, from a big picture level, demonstrates an ideological resemblance to rightism. However, what differentiates religious terrorism from rightist terrorism is its religion-oriented goals, especially these particular three; catalyzing religious apocalypse through the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), achieving a theocratic society, and religious cleansing (Heather, 2014; Martin, 2011). Since the definitions of terrorist ideologies have been confined, it is time to enter the inner dimension of these supervillains.

Amongst the chosen five supervillains from six movies, the character best representing the left-wing terrorism ideology is Baron Zemo from *Captain America: Civil War*. His goal is to destroy a militaristic organization, the Avengers. In the movie, the Avengers are in total control of the world's security because of their capacity to battle against alien threats which is beyond the competency of any national military or law enforcement. This incurs a political vacuity where the Avengers can exercise their authority above all sovereign territory. Through this lens, the Avengers represents a centralized governing body exerting its jurisdiction upon the world. Zemo's adoption of this view clearly reflects through his dialogue once he succeeds in

overthrowing the organization, "An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again. But, the one which crumbles from within... That's dead forever". If Zemo perceives the Avengers as a form of government, destroying it, ipso facto, pushes Zemo towards the left side of the ideology spectrum. A deeper examination further shows the root of Zemo's worldview. His ideology stems from the fact that his family was among the casualties in an operation by the Avengers. Because the Avengers' actions are not bound by any legal limitations, they receive no punishments as a consequence. This portrays a failed judicial system as Bainbridge stated in his study; the prefix 'Super' allowed superheroes to take action without legal consequences. This state of legal exemption serves as a critique to an incompetent judiciary (Bainbridge, 2017). It is this injustice that contributes to Zemo's vigilantism, encouraging him to resort to terrorism rather than traditional legal means to constrain the Avengers, such as the international accord brought up in the movie. Injustice brought upon those with less power by those of might and authority has always been a classic social problem. It is also important to note that Zemo is not the only character depicting societal issues. In fact, all supervillains chosen in this study are products of social issues. They, however, fall on the other side of the ideology spectrum.



Figure 1 Marius shows Aquaman ocean pollutions caused by humans.

Eric Killmonger (from *Black Panther*) and Orm Marius (from *Aquaman*) were both victims of oppression. Killmonger grew up in a neighborhood where racial inequality was present; his father even died from an attempt to break Africans free from oppression. This results in his desire to liberate African people across the globe as he states in the throne room of Wakanda: *"Y'all sitting up here comfortable... must feel good. There's about 2 billion people out there that look like us but their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tool to liberate them all"*. Similarly, Marius feels that his home and people are being taken advantage of by the surface world. In the scene where he first confronts his brother, Arthur Curry or Aquaman, he shows his brother pictures of ocean pollutions, marine resource exploitation, and overfishing, all of which are caused by humans. Along with these disturbing pictures, he says, *"For a century, they have polluted our water and poisoned our children. Now, the skies burn and our ocean boils"*. Both Killmonger and Marius use oppression when justifying their acts of violence, which seemingly aligns with leftist ideology. Their end goal, au contraire, is racial supremacy.

As Killmonger states, *"...the world is going to start over and this time we're on top"*. His ultimate goal is the global reign of African people. Likewise, Marius displays the same desire: *"It's time the seven kingdoms are one. Our ancestors gathered here... together we were the greatest empire the world'd ever seen. We have been hiding long enough. The time has come for Atlantis to rise again"*. Moreover, both Killmonger and Marius exhibit another important characteristic of rightism, nationalism. Marius's quote shows his pride in being Atlantean and the previous world domination of his race. He

wants to reestablish their position at the dominant social order. Killmonger, however, doesn't speak of his pride in being African, but the fact that he wants to disclose Wakanda to the world hints at his love for his motherland. Africans are often perceived as underdeveloped and regressive race by the xenophobes; therefore, showing off Wakanda's advancement in technology is his way of showing his esteem for the country. He is proud of what Wakanda has become, which is the opposite of what those discriminatory against his race anticipate. Conversely, the Wakandans are so advanced and progressive that dominating their oppressors is more than plausible. Despite their leftist motivations, these salient elements of racism and nationalism place Killmonger and Marius on the right side of the ideology spectrum.

Similar to abovementioned supervillains, Ultron (from *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) and Thanos (from *Avengers: Infinity War & Endgame*) have decided to resort to violence because of their stances on social issues. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Ultron is created by Tony Stark to protect the world from violent alien threat. However, what he experiences during his creation is images of wars, weapons, human cruelty, and; above all, images of Stark and his team (the Avengers) exerting their powers upon others. This mirrors a picture of an authority excusing the employment of violent measures to counter terrorism in order to conserve peace. In other words, Ultron is created to save the world from ending and ultimately humanity, but it is humanity that is destroying the world. This hypocrisy contributes to Ultron's adoption of anti-humanism. This worldview echoes through his words as he speaks to the Avengers: *"No, how could you be worthy? You're all killers"*. Likewise, what

causes Thanos to use force is the collapse of his home planet due to overpopulation. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thanos blames this catastrophe on the government of his planet, who mismanaged the resources and overlooked the issue even with his warnings. This has led him to believe that he must no longer rely on a conservative government who rather maintains the status quo as opposed to solving the problems and, hence, take the matters in to his own hands. This, further, has led him to believe that every resource in the universe is finite and must be consumed at optimal utility. Thanos's utilitarianism clearly mirrors through the scene where Gamora confronts him about the massacre on her home planet, in which half of the population was slaughtered. Thanos simply replies to her accusation, "*A small price to pay for salvation*". Both Ultron and Thanos may, again, derive their world outlooks from societal problems, yet their methodology in achieving the ideal worlds aligns with religious terrorist ideology.

Throughout the movies, multiple references to religious elements can be seen in their selection of words such as when Ultron says, "*I was meant to be new. I was meant to be beautiful. The world would have looked to the sky and seen hope... seen mercy.*" They could also be seen in side characters' attitude towards these supervillains, as exhibited by Ebony Maw's statement, "*... You have had the privilege of being saved by the great titan... Smile, for even in death, you've become children of Thanos.*" - said Ebony Maw. However, their religious terrorism ideology evinces itself most in their actions. As mentioned above, the most distinguishing characteristics of religious terrorism is causing an apocalypse by carrying out a WMD, religious cleansing, and theocracy. Thanos's use of the Infinity

Gauntlet causes a universal apocalypse. By simply snapping his fingers, he eradicates half of the universe's population, turning them into ashes that float away before disappearing. This resembles God's use of plagues to clean out the earth, or as Bruce Banner puts it, "*Thanos. He's a plague, Tony. He invades planets and takes what he wants...*". Thanos may want to cause an apocalypse to achieve his ideal universe but he demonstrates no desire to rule over it as a god. Ultron, on the other hand, wants to accomplish all of the chief goals of religious terrorism. First of all, his use of a floating island to devastate the earth is a portrayal of how a WMD can cause global extinction, or a representation of an apocalypse. Second, through global extinction, he purges all of those diverging from his vision (especially the Avengers) except his robots, who abide by his commands only, a depiction of religious cleansing. Third, by achieving an apocalypse and a religious cleansing, Ultron will reign over a planet solely habituated by his followers who perceive him as god, or a theocratic world.

The combination between ideologies, worldviews, and social conundrums betokens an intricacy in these supervillains' belief system. This complexity further unveils a better terrorist representation portrayed in superhero movies because the supervillains demystify prevalent terrorism myths. According to Richard Jackson, one of the most dominant myths is the belief that terrorists are irrational or suffering mental disorders (Jackson, 2011). In Hollywood movies, this myth repeatedly professes itself through cartoonish terrorist characters with flat motivations, such as a hunger for power or a simplistic urge to destroy everything. However, these supervillains diverge from this misconception. Not only are their actions rational but also carefully calculated. Their elaborate ideologies

make them appear sophisticated individuals. These characters depict dimensional and sane terrorists who commit violence in accordance with their views of the world and its accompanying social problems. The fact that their motivations are derivative of social problems—whether it be injustice, discrimination, oppression, environmental issues, or even violence itself—indicates a significance in their causes of terrorism. They are non-trivial but substantive, consequential, and logical. This, in addition, contrasts with another misconception of religious terrorism. In his work, Jackson further stated that a religion, as a primary cause of terrorism, is also a misunderstanding. A closer examination shows that this is true with both Ultron and Thanos. Despite showing a number of resemblances to religion-inspired terrorists, these supervillains do not act out of their religious ideologies but out of problems deemed worthy of such destruction. However, Ultron and Thanos remain perpetuating another pervasive myth of religious terrorism. In order to address this matter, we must glare deeper into the utilization of terrorist weapons and its hidden mythologies.

Armaments, powers, and mythologies

Weapons utilized by terrorists comprise three main categories: silent weapons, destructive weapons, and weaponized vehicles. Silent weapons are excellent for melee attacks and close combats where avoidance of attention is required. These weapons vary from sharp weapons, to clubs, knuckles, and protective gears. Destructive weapons consist of three subcategories; firearms, explosives, and weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). These weapons cause much greater damage than silent weapons. Amongst these, firearms are the most

popular because of their convenience in terms of procurement, cost, and application. Explosives are more complicated; thus, employing this kind of weapons requires technical and specialized personnel to build, modify, or carry out the weapons. WMDs are the most destructive of all, as they can cause millions of casualties. Currently, there are four types of WMDs: chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear. The last category is an employment of vehicles in attacks. At the broadest level, there are three modes of transportation: air, land, and water. Terrorists have long utilized all of these; from using them to transport a bomb by foot or on wheeled vehicles, to piracy or the hijacking of planes (Combs, 2018; Griset, 2008; Holms & Burke, 2001; Martin, 2011).

In the movies, all three categories of terrorist weapons can be found employed by these supervillains, albeit, portrayed in a fantastical fashion. Given that these are superhero movies, aspects of these weapons are exaggerated for entertainment; for example, silent weapons, which are normally used in small operations that require discretion and stealth, are now used in a final showdown to give the audience excitement. In some cases, they display attributes of other weapon types such as spears that can fire energy bullets or Thanos' Infinity Gauntlet—a protective gear with abilities of all weapons and beyond. Not only do silent weapons appear marvelous but modes of transportation do as well. From futuristic space crafts and incredible submarines, to regular vehicles, all kinds of transport can be seen in these movies. Even unlikely animal vehicles including seahorses, alligators, great white sharks, or rhinoceros, are also present. Yet, the question remains: what is the implication underneath this mesmerizing veneer? To answer, the underlying mythologies must be explored

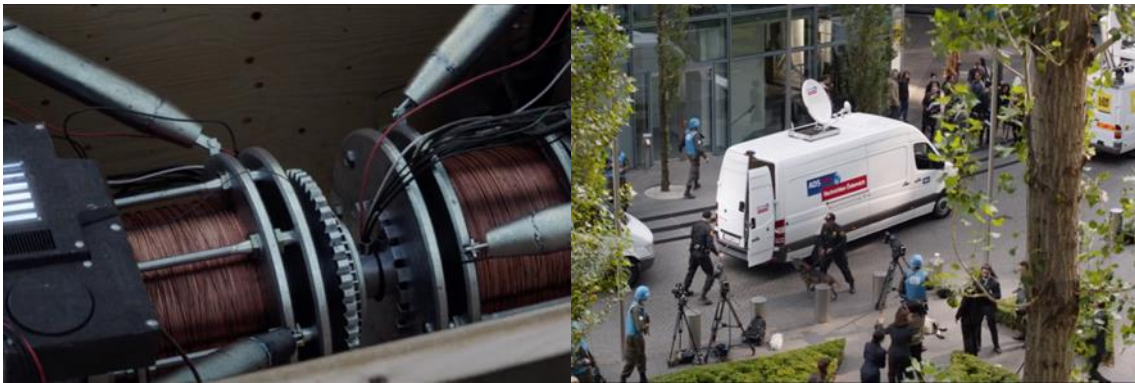


Figure 2 EMP (left) and Car Bomb (right), Zemo's weapons that can be found employed by real-world terrorists

. The first mythology scrutinized in this paper is the mythology of the commoner. This mythology regards qualities an ordinary person can possess. As such, Baron Zemo serves as a great instance for this myth. Throughout the movie, he exhibits no superpowers; he possesses neither flight, superhuman strength, nor super intelligence. What he has, however, is determination, consistency, and patience. The amount of his devotion to destroy the Avengers is best demonstrated by his words, *"I've thought about nothing for over a year. I studied you, I followed you. But now that you're standing here, I just realize... there's a bit of green in the blue of your eyes"*. Zemo also employs no weapons of futuristic technologies; instead, he uses a car bomb, an EMP which he builds by himself, and a regular handgun. Whether it is his ability to do in-depth research on his enemies or technicality in composing and carrying out bombs, all of these are abilities a commoner can attain. Yet, these myths make Zemo the most accurate picture of a real terrorist amongst other supervillains.

The second mythology under scrutiny is the mythology of the king. This mythology manifests itself through various signifiers, but one of the most prominent ones can be seen through artifacts of royalty. Throughout history, kings and queens have been known to wear crowns or head decorations to mark their distinguished status. Among other mythologies across the globe, there have also been other objects symbolizing a king's authority and legitimacy, such as Excalibur—the legendary sword of King Arthur. Similarly, supervillains use possessions as indicators of a higher position. Killmonger and Marius, for example, utilize silent weapons that reflect this myth. In *Black Panther*, the black panther suite can only be worn by the king of Wakanda; therefore, wearing it places the wearer on the country's throne. Likewise, Marius' trident and every trident in *Aquaman* can only be wielded by members of royal families. Furthermore, Marius's mount also signifies his ruling status. While his soldiers ride great white sharks, he rides a monstrous ancient alligator. An alligator signifies brute strength and power, as an apex predator dwelling atop of the food chain just like a king Marius is.

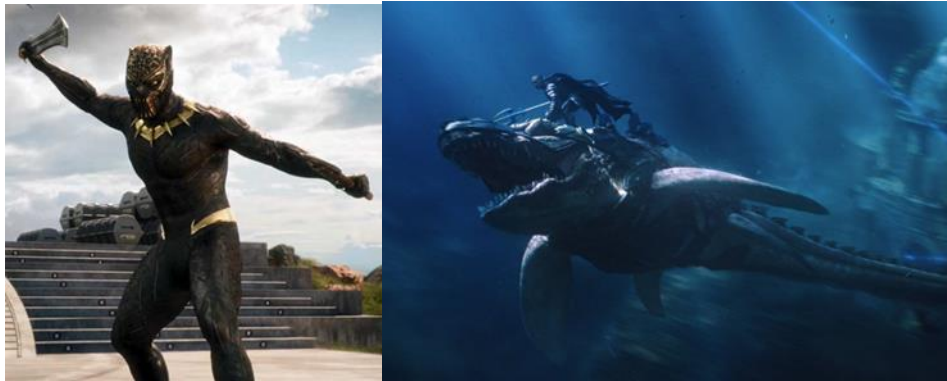


Figure 3. Killmonger in Black Panther Suite (left) and Marius's mount (right), both are signifiers of a distinguished status both characters hold.

When discussing strength and power, physicality also plays a crucial role in the king mythology. Killmonger scars himself for every victim he's murdered. As a result, cicatrices cover his body as though he is coated with scales. In addition, the black panther suite gives him superhuman strength and resistance to ballistic penetration. Marius, on the other hand, has the ability to swim at a jet speed. He is capable of breathing above water without assistance while common Atlanteans are not. All these super abilities differentiate their extraordinary from the ordinary, as if they do not belong to a level of commoners but to those of a higher rank of prestige and nobility. This reflects beliefs, such as those held by ancient Chinese and Japanese civilizations, that an emperor was the descendant of heaven thus retaining divine properties. One last notable attribute of the king mythology is authority. In *Black Panther* and *Aquaman*, both supervillains desire to be the ones giving orders. Killmonger wagers his life for the throne of Wakanda, while Marius forces consent out of the kings of the seven seas to be deemed Ocean Master. Their pursuit of the highest position among their respective hierarchies is to assume a position of command and

access to military potency that will then be wielded to bend the world to their will.

Nevertheless, Inhuman strength, objects of status, and authority are only a subset of what the next two supervillains possess, which brings us to the last mythology, the mythology of god. In different regions across the world, each culture has its own interpretation of cosmic entities. Even with a number of dissimilarities, they share a few common aspects. The first aspect concerns the ability to dictate life and death. Among the chosen supervillains, only Ultron and Thanos exhibit this aptitude. Ultron can upload his consciousness onto the internet and download it to any robot he desires. As shown in the movie once his body is destroyed, he instantly takes on another robot's autonomy. This means he can be reborn endlessly as long as there exist robots for him to possess. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, Thanos is able to use his gauntlet (equipped with the time stone) to reverse time and bring the character Vision back to life. The second aspect concerns transportation, time, and space. As mentioned, terrorists use all modes of transports in their missions. Ultron and Thanos, as well, use air crafts and wheeled vehicles in their operations. They, however,

have a transpative ability beyond real-world perpetrators—a transport of divinity known as ubiquity. Ubiquity, or omnipresence, is an ability to exist in multiple presences in different places at once, to reside in everything, or to be everywhere. Ultron manifests this power through his connection to the internet. As mentioned, his ability to digitally upload and download his consciousness allows him to take over any digital device. If his desire to wipe humans from the earth comes true, this means his robots will solely inhabit the planet. Hence, Ultron can be anyone and anywhere in the world through the network that connects him to every cyborg. Thanos uses the reality stone to contort the physical space surrounding him. He can pull an object closer and or push it further. Moreover, with the space stone in hand, Thanos can travel across the universe in an instant. The space stone grants him the power to conjure a portal, a teleportation device that links one point in the universe to another. By simply stepping into the portal, he can disappear from one planet and reappear in another within a heartbeat. The final aspect concerns the use of WMDs. Weapons of Mass Destruction come in four main categories, chemical, biological, radiological,

and nuclear; these weapons can potentially cause up to millions of deceases. Even so, Ultron and Thanos use far more lethal weapons, weapons of apocalyptic powers. Whether it be through plagues, tornados, floods, or earthquakes, gods have been known to orchestrate nature to rid the world of things they wish gone. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Ultron builds a floating island that would wipe all living creatures off the earth on collision. This mimics the huge asteroid that once caused the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction. Thanos, likewise, eliminates half of the universe’s population with a weapon akin to a natural phenomenon known as a plague, as he turns living creatures into ashes at random. The picture of humans falling apart into black particles is a reminder of a plague, a decomposition of dead organic matter. Once a living creature dies, its cells break apart and are reduced to atoms. One might argue that humans now have the technology to invent plagues; however, it is Thanos’s execution of the weapon in a god-like manner that makes a difference. He needs not to build a weapon or plan to carry out one. Au contraire, what he needs is a mere finger snap.



Figure 4 Thanos uses time stone to reverse time and resurrects Vision

Put together, what do these mythologies imply? The most important implication these mythologies contain is the hierarchy of powers. The mythologies of commoner, king, and god constitute a power scale with Thanos and Ultron at the higher end, Killmonger and Marius in the middle, and Zemo at the lower end. This resonates with another terrorism myth. According to Jackson and his colleagues (2011), part of the misperception that religions are the causal core of religion-inspired terrorism is the belief that religious terrorism is much graver than its secular counterparts. From this perspective, Ultron and Thanos, as supervillains most coherent with religious ideologies, seem to propel this myth. Their abilities, powers, and weapons reflect the mythologies of god which are more potent than the other three supervillains'. Moreover, their ultimate goals are of much greater scopes than the rest. Ultron aims for the total eradication of mankind, while Thanos succeeds in massacring trillions of lives in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Their ability to harness the forces of nature and wield them as WMDs to create an apocalypse aligns with the concept of religious terrorism, further reinforcing the correlation between them and religion-inspired perpetrators. Despite the perpetuation of this myth, these supervillains also counter another. The last myth Jackson mentioned in his work is that poverty causes terrorism, when, in fact, the relation between these two remains unclear. In addition, this myth is often thought to be linked with lower levels of education among terrorists, while many studies have suggested otherwise. Rather, terrorists are more likely to be activists, with decent levels of education and resources, who resort to violence. This description of terrorists suits these supervillains well, considering the fact their goals are derivative of social problems

as discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, these supervillains are presented as highly knowledgeable, intellectual, and philosophical in spite of unclear references to their education levels. For example, Zemo's ability to create various types of bombs suggests that he is well educated in the field of Explosives Engineering without actually showing the audience his education. Marius and Thanos possess all the resources necessary to achieve their goals, whether it be skilled subordinates, armies, weapons, and alliances. Even Killmonger and Ultron, who start with a relatively lack of resources, possess the knowledge, capability, and means to acquire the resources they need.

Conclusion

Despite significant interest in terrorism in films, the audiences still prefer to consume movies with indirect touches on the topic (Riegler, 2014). This is why terrorists in films now appear in an unrecognizable form and can easily pass by the audience's discretion. Nevertheless, the analysis provided in this paper uncloaks the disguised terrorists hidden under the veil of supervillains. This examination of ideologies and mythologies strengthens the pre-established bridge that connects the two subjects, supporting it with beams and cables from a different angle. In addition, this adventure to such depth allows for the discovery of a shift in the way terrorists are represented in superhero movies. In his 2014 study, Jerrod S. MacFarlane found the portrayal of terrorists in superhero films to be problematic. They appeared evil, cartoonish, and with simplistic motivations. This not only perpetuates misapprehension of terrorist and misleads the audience but also deprives them of opportunities for accurate comprehension

(MacFarlane, 2014). Comparably, Riegler further stated in his analysis that terrorist characters are often posited as psychotic and irrational; they are symbolic rather than fully fleshed-out and convincing characters due to the minor interest the Hollywood industry takes in the subject. However, in this analysis, terrorists (supervillains) are no longer depicted as power-hungry one-dimensional characters with shallow motives, as light has been shed on the different dimensions that make up these characters. Their complicated belief systems enrich their humanity; therefore, they appear as well-developed and rational characters. The points they raise in the movies are substantive and, thus, arguably justified and politically conscious in their use of violence. Their weapons, tactics, and resources indicate expertise, knowledgeability, capability, and wealth. All these elements render these supervillains believable characters that demystify pervasive terrorist myths; in other words, these supervillains are a more accurate depiction of real terrorists and, ergo, promotive of a finer and more nuanced understanding of terrorists. But, why the terrorist representation has shifted?

At the broadest level; two possible factors may contribute to this phenomena, capitalism and politics, all of which stem from the event of 9/11. The incident entailed questions around differences between races, ethnics, religious beliefs, and social values. It allowed the movie industry a view of diversity and, essentially, opportunities. As Sarah K. Reilly suggests, the superhero genre has become the most financially successful film genre in

contemporary society. The interest to entertain the masses and shape mass culture is underlined with consumption and capital (Reilly, 2013). The fact that supervillains now represent various social values and issues reflects the industry's attempt at audience inclusivity; to tap into the potential market of minorities, reach as many cultures as possible, and ultimately raise profits. Despite an impact of capitalism on this changing portrayal of terrorists, however, the more direct impact might come from another aftermath of 9/11, the global war on terror or GWOT. Since its commencement by Bush administration in 2001, the GWOT has continuously proved futile for the past two decades. A 2020 assessment of the GWOT's results demonstrated that the war has shown no major military success. Moreover, the international efforts to tackle transnational terrorism have yielded only a slight reduction in the numbers of global attacks and, by no means, made the citizens feel secured (Kattelman, 2020). This war's infertility may have caused the questions regarding the effectiveness of the counter-terrorism policies and how well our understandings of terrorists are among the public. This uncertain feeling towards the GWOT clearly manifests in the films through these well-defined supervillains. As elucidated in this article, these fully developed characters do not only try to redefine and rethink terrorists, but also question and problematize the superheroes' militaristic missions "to preserve peace", a core commitment of the GWOT, with political and societal problems unrecognized by the superheroes.

References

- Bainbridge, J. (2017). Beyond the Law: What is so 'Super' About Superheroes and Supervillains? *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*(3), 367. doi:10.1007/s11196-017-9514-0
- Boggs, C., & Pollard, T. (2006). Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism. *New Political Science*, 28(3), 335-351.
- Box Office Mojo. (2018). *All time box office: Worldwide grosses*. Retrieved October 3, 2020 from <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>
- Combs, C. C. (2018). *Terrorism in the twenty-first century*: New York ; London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. Eighth Edition.
- Coogler, R. (2018). *Black Panther*. In K. Feige (Producer). USA: Walt Disney Studios.
- Griset, P. L. (2008). *Terrorism in perspective*: London : Sage, 2008. 2nd ed.
- Heather, S. G. (2014). Defining and Distinguishing Secular and Religious Terrorism. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8(2).
- Holms, J. P., & Burke, T. (2001). *Terrorism*: New York : Pinnacle Books, c2001.
- Iyer, A., Webster, J., Hornsey, M. J., & Vanman, E. J. (2014). Understanding the power of the picture: the effect of image content on emotional and political responses to terrorism. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 44(7), 511–521.
- Jackson, R., Jarvis, L., Gunning, J., & Smyth, M. (2011). *Terrorism : a critical introduction*. In. Basingstoke: Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kattelman, K. T. (2020). Assessing success of the Global War on Terror: terrorist attack frequency and the backlash effect. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 13(1), 67–86.
- MacFarlane, J. S. (2014). Desperate times and desperate measures: false-representation and distortion of terrorism in post-9/11 superhero films. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 7(3), 446.
- Martin, G. (2011). *Essentials of terrorism : concepts and controversies*: Los Angeles : SAGE, c2011. 2nd ed.
- Reilly, S. K., Master's Theses, & Dissertations. (2013). *Superheros as Social Practice*. Master's Theses, Dissertations, Graduate Research and Major Papers Overview.
- Riegler, T. (2014). "MIRRORING TERROR": THE IMPACT OF 9/11 ON HOLLYWOOD CINEMA. *Imaginations Journal*, 5(2), 103-119.
- Ritchie, H. R., Max. (2019). *Causes of death*. Retrieved October 3, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death>
- Russo, A., & Russo, J. (2016). *Captain America: Civil War*. In K. Feige (Producer). USA: Walt Disney Studios.
- Russo, A., & Russo, J. (2018). *Avengers: Infinity War*. In K. Feige (Producer). USA: Walt Disney Studios.
- Russo, A., & Russo, J. (2019). *Avengers: Endgame*. In K. Feige (Producer). USA: Walt Disney Studios.
- Treat, S. (2009). How America Learned to Stop Worrying and Cynically ENJOY! The Post-9/11 Superhero Zeitgeist. *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6(1), 103.
- VanDerWerff, T. (2016). *Superhero Moives Have Become An Endless Attempt To Rewrite 9/11*. Retrieved October 3, 2020 from <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/19/8577803/avengers-age-of-ultron-review-politics>
- Wan, J. (2018). *Aquaman*. In P. Safran & R. Cowan (Producer). USA: Warner Brothers Pictures.
- Whedon, J. (2015). *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. In K. Feige (Producer). USA: Walt Disney Studios.