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Making sense of the American Collective Identity through *Captain America: The First Avenger*  
(2011): A Multi-method Analysis

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MAKING SENSE OF THE AMERICAN COLLECTIVE IDENTITY THROUGH *CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER* (2011): A MULTI-METHOD ANALYSIS

**Abstract**

American national identity has received much attention from multidisciplinary fields of research. Thus, this research deals with the role of heroes and villains in reflecting on post-9/11 events—specifically in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). The focus is directed toward the symbolic meanings of the main characters in the chosen movie. Through cinematic representations, this research highlights the nexus between heroization, villainization, and the American national identity. The confrontations between American heroes and foreign villains in entertainment reflect America’s global positioning as a superpower fighting “evil.” I chose a qualitative research method to prove this hypothesis. I conducted a thematic analysis that involves decoding the main characters by examining their binary opposition and representation of the U.S. and the foreign enemy and their connotations within the broad context of reasserting and repositioning the U.S. as a global power after 9/11. I also decoded the meanings of key events within the movies in relation to their historical contexts and their connotations in a post-9/11 context. My theoretical framework relies mainly on Claude Levi-Strauss’s theory of Binary Opposition, Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities, Jeffrey Alexander’s Cultural Trauma, and Michael C. Frank’s Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism in post-9/11. This research suggests that the symbolism of Superheroes and Supervillains articulates their role in rebuilding national identity in post-traumatic times.

**Keywords:** National identity, Captain America, the Red Skull, cultural trauma, post-9/11.

**Introduction**

The American film industry plays a crucial role in reinforcing national identity in the wake of collective trauma experiences. It reflects the changes in American culture and how they shape and gets shaped by them throughout time. In his book *American Cinema/American Culture*, John Belton argues that “American cinema reveals, directly and indirectly, something about the

American experience, identity, and culture.”<sup>1</sup> Movies reflect the social reality of a given society and shape it, intentionally or unintentionally. The research to date has focused on national identity, binary opposition, films, and geopolitics separately. However, Identity Studies have recently become a research field that integrates various contributing fields, including geography, political science, history, ethnicity, and sociology, among other fields. Yet, studying national identity through the binary opposition between heroes and villains in cinema has not yet been investigated.

Twenty-two years ago, the traumatizing nature of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 caused a cultural shock nationwide. This unique event has changed the course of American history and the world in general, for it divided the world into pre-9/11 and post-9/11 realities, and the Americans experienced what is known as collective trauma. The American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander argues that cultural trauma occurs “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever, and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the adverse effects of the attacks, Americans needed a reassertion of their identity. They needed hope, embodied through firefighters who were considered national heroes in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Heroism is deeply embedded in American culture. The need for heroism was crucial to give Americans hope and strength in overcoming trauma. Dualistic morality is at the core of American values. Neil J. Smelser argues that the dualistic morality of good versus evil was represented through President George W. Bush’s language in his address to the nation on the 9/11 attacks and the creation of the image of heroes as an immediate response to the events. Americans needed not only heroes but also a moral crusade against an “evil” enemy.<sup>3</sup>

The central claim of my paper is that American national identity is embodied through the binary opposition between the hero/U.S.A./the Self and the villain/Georival/the Other. The current research relies on heroization and villainization in investigating popular culture’s role in reinforcing national identity in the post-9/11 traumatic period. The dichotomous relationship between the main characters in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) illustrates their importance in reassuring national identity in the aftermath of collective trauma experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, 2013, xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> Smelser, “Epilogue: September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma,” 277.

This study adopts a qualitative method to examine the binary opposition between superheroes and supervillains, analyzing its implications for national identity post-9/11. Thematic analysis will decode the symbolic meanings of characters and compare cinematic events with real-world events related to the post-9/11 narrative. The research's theoretical framework explores the intersections between the characters' binary opposition, cultural trauma, and the 9/11 attacks. It draws on critical theories such as Claude Levi-Strauss's Binary Opposition theory, Alexander's Cultural Trauma, and the Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism and Counterterrorism in the post-9/11 context. According to Levi-Strauss, media narratives, like films, often present opposing main characters, heroes, and villains, introducing contrast in their nature.

My paper comprises three sections: The first section begins by presenting the evolution of the superhero character, Captain America, as a national symbol in American mythology by tracing his origins in comic books and his transformation into an eternal icon. It then focuses on Captain America's role in deconstructing American collective traumas through a quest for belongingness and the symbolism of his journey in a post-9/11 context. The second section introduces the supervillain, the Red Skull, his motives, his relationship with the superhero, and his symbolic association with Nazi Germany throughout the movie. The third section presents the research findings, sketching out the film's different cinematic representations of 9/11. I present the findings of this research, focusing on the cultural imaginary of terrorism and counterterrorism as part of the new U.S. security discourse in a post-9/11 world.

### **The Evolution of Captain America as a National Icon in American Mythology**

The Golden Age (1938–1954) was characterized by the emergence of a new genre, the Superhero genre. This genre started in comic books by introducing the first icon Superman in the 1930s, which resulted in the creation of hundreds of superhero characters, including Captain America, in 1941, who became one of the most influential figures in American history.

### **Old Times Captain America in Comic Books**

Joe Simon and Jack Kirby are two comic book masterminds who created many superheroes and brought them together under one universe called the Marvel Universe. They made Captain America at times when Americans were torn between interventionism and isolationism on the eve of World War Two: the period after the Great Depression was complicated for the people who had mixed opinions regarding interventionism. Simon and Kirby introduced Captain America as a new legend to the American people. He triggered public

opinion about the war even before the United States participated. Captain America's origin starts with Steve Rogers, known as Captain America, trying to join the army but failing to do so due to his frail looks, disease, and weak body. Rogers was chosen for an experiment that would empower him physically and transform him into Captain America. This choice was his humanitarian and nationalistic sentiments which would result in the creation of a perfect soldier.<sup>4</sup>

After a period of inactivity, Captain America appears again in comic books during the Roaring 60s to express the turmoil lived at that time. He embodied America's atmosphere and Americans' uncertainties, doubts, and despair at a time when many events were happening simultaneously, like the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, Feminism, President Kennedy's Assassination, and the Cold War. Critics like John Shelton Lawrence stressed the reason behind excluding and not involving Captain America in the Vietnam War. He explains that the American people did not support the Vietnam War then because it was a lost war from which the nation came out devastated and defeated.<sup>5</sup>

Another battle fought by Captain America in comic books was during the Cold War: in the 1980s, Simon and Kirby created another comic book issue, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, dealing with espionage and Communism. Captain America was called a "Nazi-smasher" during WWII and restyled as a red-baiting "commie-smasher" during the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> These events picture the national as well as the international mood. In a nutshell, Captain America's re-appearance throughout American history makes him a "man out of time" who comes to save America whenever problems and crises to give Americans hope and lift their sense of national unity.<sup>7</sup>

Simon and Kirby brought Captain America into the Marvel Universe's continuum, making him part of the American Myth. This character survived decades of turmoil in American history through narrative devices. They made his comic book a highly elastic narrative revisited when needed, "seeing [...] a readiness to embrace a shifting series of soothing myths over awkward or unpleasant historical facts."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the shift from the emphasis on unpleasant past events toward a positive narrative through an existing myth could heal the audience.

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<sup>4</sup> Dittmer, "Captain America in the News," 146.

<sup>5</sup> Jewett, Robert, and John Shelton Lawrence. "Captain America and the Crusade against Evil," 28.

<sup>6</sup> Patton, "Review of Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence," 104.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Patton, "Review of Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence," 105.

Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence explain that this comic book character was a “non–democratic means to achieve democratic ends.”<sup>9</sup> As part of American popular culture, the Superhero genre was used by politicians to advocate certain ideologies for the audience that believes in superheroes. Jason Dittmer claims and suggests that during the Bush administration’s War on Terror, Captain America, among other superheroes, serves as “a crucial resource for legitimating, contesting, and reworking states’ foreign policies.”<sup>10</sup> This is a critical assessment of American foreign policy after 9/11 and the media’s use in framing Americans’ support for their policy.

The continuity of Captain America’s narrative indicates its importance in the American mind. He plays a crucial role in expressing American cultural traumas and collective identity in different time frames. The development of myths throughout American history ensured the acceptance of new mythologies quickly, and this could be the reason behind the birth of many figures in American culture. However, Captain America’s myth remains unique, for it is timeless. It serves many purposes, among which are political, social, cultural, and psychological. The continuity of his narrative depended on fighting evil. He fought against Nazi Germany and Communism and tried to unite the nation during the 60s national turmoil. In this sense, his narrative reveals much about the cultural traumas experienced.

### **The Role of Captain America as a *Monomyth* in Revealing American Cultural Traumas**

One of the foundations of American society is dualistic morality, as Neil J. Smelser calls it. He argues that moral orientation in American society is one of its core values. He asserts that “the moral thread has also been central in literature and entertainment, notably the Western film.”<sup>11</sup> Smelser explains dualistic morality in terms of the national reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attacks focusing on the choice of words President George W. Bush used in his speech on 9/11, 2001, for he “took up the language of evil, personalizing the latter in Osama bin Laden, and continued to repeat the theme. His public utterances were also sprinkled with cowboy, posse, “dear-or-alive” talk, all consistent with the good vs. evil symbolism, and framing the national response as a moral crusade against a ‘sacred evil.’”<sup>12</sup>

Americans’ immediate responses to the attack were also embodied in creating heroes and seeking existing ones after the traumatic experience. As mentioned in previous parts of this

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<sup>9</sup> Jewett, Robert, and John Shelton Lawrence. “Captain America and the Crusade against Evil,” 28.

<sup>10</sup> Dittmer, “Captain America in the News,” 3.

<sup>11</sup> Smelser, “Epilogue: September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma,” 276.

<sup>12</sup> Smelser, 277.

research, heroes embody this dualism of a “good” America versus an “evil” enemy. The creation of heroes after a traumatic event represents hope and strength, and they are regarded as a “barometer of the collective’s moral and emotional state and conflicts. How the image of the hero evolves tells us more about the psyche of the society at any given moment than the individual or group identified as the hero.”<sup>13</sup> Goren also emphasizes the role of the hero in reflecting collective traumas, focusing on New York City firefighters’ mission in rescuing people.

### **American Collective Identity during Cultural Traumas**

Cultural sociologists argue that 20<sup>th</sup>-century America experienced cultural traumas, defined as events leaving lasting marks on collective identity. Trauma is socially constructed, resulting from unexpected events affecting a group. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks had a profound impact on American identity, fostering a sense of national unity. This cultural trauma heightened the importance of national identity while diminishing other subnational identities. *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) portrays World War II as a backdrop of collective trauma, with the character of Captain America representing the nation’s efforts to overcome the war’s trauma and combat evil threatening its core values.

Political scientist Elizabeth Theiss-Morse observed an increase in the display of flags across the US after September 11, symbolizing a renewed sense of community. Americans have long felt connected to each other, as Benedict Anderson described in *Imagined Communities* (1991). He views a nation as an imagined community, where individuals share a common identity despite not knowing most fellow members. He used the term imagined to point out the imaginary, nonexistent, and elusive quality of the actual event. He continues to explain that “imagination informs trauma construction just as much when the reference is to something that has actually occurred as to something that has not.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, both Alexander and Anderson believe that not only actual traumatic events can affect identity but also imagined and constructed ones. Captain America embodies this collective identity, representing the nation’s values and serving as a unifying figure during World War II. The film uses propaganda and media to reinforce this collective identity, making Captain America a symbol of patriotism and nationalism, shaping the shared national identity. While the movie depicts events from the past, its production reflects contemporary times and highlights the enduring importance of collective identity.

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<sup>13</sup> Goren, “Society’s Use of the Hero Following a National Trauma,” 37.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 8.



The views presented complement each other, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the American experience after September 11. Anderson's concept of an imagined community extends beyond geographical boundaries, encompassing shared beliefs, history, traditions, and more, uniting the nation. American cinema reflects this sense of unity and national identity by portraying external threats in various symbolic forms, culminating in the U.S. victory over its adversaries. These heroic narratives offer catharsis, purifying and restoring positive energy within the community. Heroes serve as therapeutic figures, providing inspiration, hope, and strength as role models for people. Overall, these perspectives shed light on how collective identity and cultural trauma intersect in shaping the American narrative.

### **Examining Captain America's Monomyth in the American Collective Identity**

Joseph Campbell's monomyth, the Hero's Journey, aims for improvement and enhancement goals. It is widely applied today, with the hero's mission to uplift the human spirit. Captain America's journey exemplifies this journey, beginning with ordinary life in Brooklyn, advancing through military acceptance, change, gaining superpowers, helping friends, defeating enemies, and returning to normalcy. Consequently, his journey is as follows: ordinary life => adventure => ordinary life. Captain America's journey parallels America's 20<sup>th</sup>-century history; born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1918, symbolizing Independence Day, and the U.S. victory in the Great War. He became a comic book superhero in 1941, leading U.S. forces to victory. He represented the turmoil of the 1960s with the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. During the Cold War, he fought Communism and symbolized Americans facing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after losing his best friend. He also appeared in the 9/11 context amid another traumatic event, embodying the American Dream and identity in the superhero genre. His lifeline aligns with 20th-century American history, making him a visible symbol of America.

The creation of Captain America's icon could not have happened without choosing the right person for the experiment. As a story of origin, there was a focus on the traits of the experimented. Doctor Erskine was looking for unique attributes because he knew that the Super-Soldier Serum amplified the subject's characteristics from his first experiment on Schmidt. Steve Rogers was a perfect choice because he showed patriotism, courage, humbleness, and wisdom. Despite his weak physique, he struggled to get what he wanted—

joining the U.S. military service, and this makes Rogers an interesting case to study because he struggled to belong within society.

### **Marginalization and the Search for Belongingness through the Character of Steve Rogers**

Simon and Kirby introduced the audience to the protagonist Steve Rogers as a human being with defects. At first, Rogers' narrative begins by showing a feeble man in constant struggle with the circumstances surrounding him, one of which would be the struggle to belong to American society. Throughout his life, Rogers faced marginalization and isolation because he was physically weak. People did not accept him for his differences except for his only friend, James "Bucky" Barnes, who accepted him for his flaws. At the same time, Rogers considered him a social link. Indeed, the Marvel Universe aims to make the audience identify with Rogers, as a human being, from the start, so Rogers was seen as a frail, marginalized, and isolated member of the society who, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, is looking for safety in order to jump to the next step, which is belongingness. Because of his bodily deterioration, Rogers was subjected to violence and bullying by others who were physically stronger than him. Simplicity is vital in formulating the audience's identification process with Rogers. This section deals with the shift from the comic book to its film adaptation, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011).

### **The Transformation to Captain America**

Rogers' narrative structure moves along as he tries to enlist in military service. The audience is captured by his motivation and willingness to serve his country. He is portrayed as an individual who desires to stick to his beliefs and moral values and attain his goals regardless of physical limitations. An individual cast away from his society can sacrifice anything for the sake of belongingness. Henceforth, the narrative changes to give Rogers a chance by being accepted into the military service after failing four times and having the opportunity to overcome his physical ailments by injecting the super-soldier serum into his body. Indeed, this physical transformation gives the character a new personality, that of Captain America, and satisfies his second need, safety.

Rogers undergoes a transformative journey, embracing his flaws and turning them into virtues, which leads to societal acceptance. This reflects the inherent social norms in any society. His narrative portrays the complexities of social rejection before his transformation in the first Captain America movie (2011). The ongoing conflict of being out of sync with time

highlights the importance of belonging, resonating with the audience's shared feeling of marginalization. His dual identities as an individual and a superhero blur reality and fiction, impacting both his personal and collective journey. As a man out of time, fulfilling his mission causes both trauma and healing.

### **Post-9/11 American Foreign Policy and the Therapeutic Aspects of Captain America**

Judith Jordan's Relational-Cultural Theory posits that human beings need a connection to thrive, and that isolation leads to suffering at both personal and cultural levels. This idea is exemplified in Rogers' relationship with his childhood friend, James “Bucky” Barnes. Bucky served as a social bridge for Rogers, providing a sense of belonging. When Bucky seemingly dies in *The First Avenger* (2011), Rogers mourns and seeks revenge on Hydra. However, in *The Winter Soldier* (2014), Rogers discovers that Bucky is still alive but transformed into the Winter Soldier. Despite Bucky's memory loss, Rogers believes he will eventually remember his identity. Bucky remains the bridge to belonging for Rogers, as the only person who can relate to him generationally. The audience witnesses how the Winter Soldier refrains from killing Captain America, showing that goodwill can overcome barriers in a relationship when someone truly matters to another person.

The audience can identify with the protagonist in another way; Steve's reaction to his loss highlights his journey toward finding meaning by taking revenge on Hydra. The latter is emblematic of the 9/11 attacks when the U.S. witnessed one of the most horrible events in its history. The American people mourned their dead, and the government expressed its grief through the War on Terror's immediate declaration. As Dittmer puts it, “to understand the symbolic and dichotomous relationship between Captain America/U.S.A./Self and the Supervillain/Georival/Other, attention must be paid to the history of the Captain America icon itself.”<sup>15</sup> By substituting Captain America for the U.S.A. and Hydra for Terrorism, the American audience may identify with Captain America, for he symbolizes patriotism. He also represents the motivation driving the country to avenge its enemies by winning an imaginary war on the screen.<sup>16</sup>

Superhero contribution to the American collective identity has recently been a research field for scholars interested in understanding the complex nature of U.S. identity transformation after the 9/11 attacks. This dissertation sheds light on Captain America as an enduring icon for Americans by aligning his lifeline along 20th-century American history. Though fictional,

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<sup>15</sup> Dittmer, “Captain America in the News,” 631.

<sup>16</sup> Parker & Hammer, “Captain America: The Search for Belonging,” 123.

Simon and Kirby ensured that Captain America would remain part of American mythology and, subsequently, the American national identity. The film director Joe Johnston succeeded in implementing American values like patriotism, honesty, individualism, and self-reliance throughout the movies. They created a monomyth whose lifeline is compatible with 20th-century American experiences like World War One, World War Two, the Cold War, and the War on Terror. The transformation of the comic genre from the written to the visual demonstrates the importance of the genre in the U.S.

Movies have a dynamic role in capturing and delivering cultural traumas to the audience. Simon and Kirby not only captured cultural traumas but also helped the audience find a way to feel a sense of belonging. They created a character, Steve Rogers, who suffered from marginalization, bullying, and isolation in his social environment and tried hard to join the society. He was physically empowered, but what made him accepted was his inner goodness, his honesty, and self-reliance. Rogers tried to overcome different problems with Nick Fury's help, who wanted to integrate him into society again after his long sleep. Avenging America's attack seemed to be an American principle innate in America's foreign policy and emphasized in the American film industry. Although Captain America reflects American national identity, he cannot fulfill his role without his counterpart—the supervillain. To understand the complementary relationship between the hero and the villain, an emphasis on the French anthropologist Claud Levi Strauss's theory of Binary Opposites is crucial in this work. The superhero and the supervillain's analysis depends on the categorization of each character depending on specific criteria.

Claude Levi-Strauss proposed the Binary Opposites theory, positing that narratives contain opposing main characters in written or visual forms. These opposites help develop the plot and the narrative. For example, in a superhero movie, the binary opposite could be good versus evil, hero versus villain. The idea of oppositional hierarchy denotes that understanding a term within a pair of related terms would depend mainly on both terms in that pair. For example, if one wants to explain good, he/she should explain evil and vice versa. Though the first part of this paper deals with the superhero characteristics, Captain America, the latter can only exist with its counterpart, the Supervillain, which is very important in understanding this genre's plot and narrative.

**Understanding Character and Characterization through the Villain, the Red Skull, in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)**

In his book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, Peter Coogan explained the symbolism of the superhero and the supervillain. What characterizes the superhero genre is not only the Superhero but also the existence of its counterpart, the Supervillain. Their existence is proportionate. Coogan defines the Supervillain as “[...] a villain who is super, that is, someone who commits villainous or evil acts and does so in a way superior to ordinary criminals or at a magnified level [...] the supervillain is as the reverse of his foe the superhero [...]”<sup>17</sup> As such, supervillains are of “five types: the monster, the enemy commander, the mad scientist, the criminal mastermind, and the inverted superhero-supervillain.”<sup>18</sup> Just as the superhero highlights society’s virtues and values, the supervillain enacts the reverse of those values: a cut-off with all the moral values in each community. Moreover, the supervillain can enact that inversion by forcing the superhero to rise and defend those virtues.

### **The Superhero–Supervillain Relationship through Proactivity and Reactivity**

American melodrama encapsulates heroism, victimization, and the capacity to overcome psychological difficulties. Narratives provide a basis for the government’s exercise of military and economic power, fostering a moral obligation to fight evil by associating America with victimhood. Elizabeth Anker depicts melodrama as a cultural mode shaping political discourse and national identity in contemporary America.<sup>19</sup> She explores how 9/11 was framed through melodrama, reinforcing American collective identity. Melodrama constructs a narrative wherein a villain threatens America; it frames a narrative that requires reparation for suffering. It demands heroic action to challenge any offensive attack on the country, “the villain thus becomes the catalyst for state action, and hence for what it means to be America, for, without a villain, there is no victim and thus no hero or heroic feat.”<sup>20</sup> This binary opposition between hero and villain is crucial, reinforcing a sense of belongingness.

Supervillains and superheroes share various connections. Both Rogers and Schmidt underwent experimentation with the Super-Soldier Serum, resulting in physical and moral enhancements. Schmidt views himself and Rogers as “Superior Men,” but they represent opposing forces. Coogan distinguishes characters, stating that villains are proactive, while heroes react to their threats, justifying their use of violence.<sup>21</sup> Captain America wields a shield for defense, while Schmidt holds a gun, symbolizing aggression and proactivity. The

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<sup>17</sup> Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, 76.

<sup>18</sup> Coogan, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Anker, “Villains, Victims, and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and 9/11,” 22.

<sup>20</sup> Anker, “Villains, Victims, and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and 9/11,” 26.

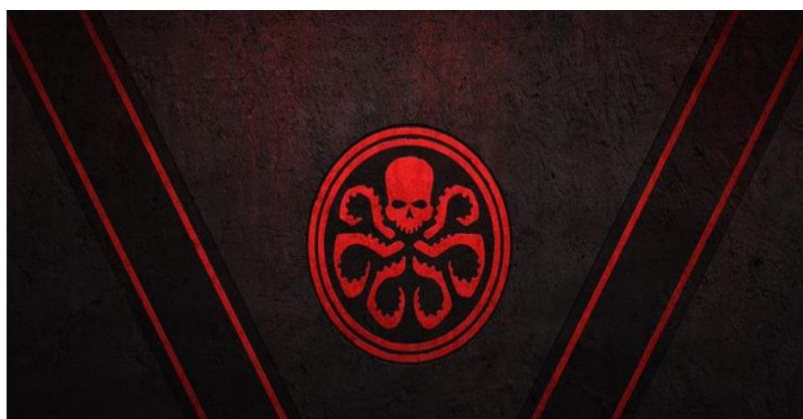
<sup>21</sup> Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, 11.

superhero's reactivity stems from their code, driven by the pursuit of the greater good and society. Superheroes are willing to infringe upon others' civil and legal rights due to their code, based on the principle that their powers grant them the right to take justice into their own hands.<sup>22</sup> This idea is encapsulated by Stan Lee's axiom: "With great power comes great responsibility."<sup>23</sup> Superheroes often assume dual identities to uphold justice, combat corruption, and confront evil, utilizing their abilities and power to act.

### **The Representation of Nazis through the Red Skull Character**

The Red Skull, also known as Johann Schmidt, is an egocentric scientist who believed in the ideology of *Übermensch* = Overman = beyond human. It is a concept where the superhuman race is destined to rule ordinary people. The term *Übermensch* was used frequently by Hitler and the Nazi regime to describe their idea of a biologically superior German race. The Nazi notion of the master race also spawned the concept of "inferior humans," who should be dominated and enslaved. From this idea, one can notice that Schmidt and Hitler share the same ideology of the existence of "inferior" and "superior" men.<sup>24</sup>

Hydra, in this movie, is the scientific branch developed by Schmidt and Dr. Zola under the sovereignty of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler. Schmidt's allegiance was to Hitler; however, after acquiring his new powers, he shifted his loyalty to himself because he believed in being an Overman. In this case, Schmidt wanted to be superior and have God's power.<sup>25</sup> Throughout



**Figure 1. Hydra's Logo : Red Skull**

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<sup>22</sup> Coogan, 112.

<sup>23</sup> This quote is often attributed to the legendary co-creator of many Marvel Comics characters, Stan Lee. The quote is often associated with Spiderman, but the exact source of the quote is difficult to pin down as it has been used in various works of comics and media over the years. (For Marvel fans, one can easily notice the presence of Stan Lee in the movies in different scenes, which alludes to his importance.)

<sup>24</sup> Cybulska, "Nietzsche's *Übermensch*."

<sup>25</sup> *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dir. Joe Johnston, Perf. Chris Evans and Hugo Weaving, 2011, DISNEY PLUS, scenes taken at (01:44:03–01:44:17).

history, the Red Skull symbolizes death, evil, and everything dangerous and bloody, while Red is associated with blood.

Interestingly, Hydra's symbol is like the Nazi Swastika: Simon and Kirby designed the emblem of Hydra as a Red Skull with six tentacles or legs in red while the background is black, as shown in Figure 1,<sup>26</sup> whereas, in Figure 2,<sup>27</sup> the Nazi flag is composed of three colors: red, white, and black. Kiki Evans argues that the Nazi swastika "looks similar to the tentacles on Hydra's logo"<sup>28</sup> and that both flags symbolize their followers' ideology.

By possessing these characteristics, Schmidt is now the symbol of death and every evil on earth. He represents anarchy, fascism, and the ultimate foil of Captain America's principles of democracy and freedom. Since Captain America's Star-Spangled Costume with red, white, and blue colors represents the U.S. flag and signifies loyalty to American values, the Red Skull's redhead represents nihilistic intentions to seek bloodlust at the cost of democracy for the sake of power. He also symbolizes dictatorship since he considers people enslaved and rules as he wishes without restrictions.



**Figure 2. German Swastika Flag**

According to Nietzsche, the Overman possesses the ability to influence humanity indefinitely, impacting people's thoughts and values for generations to come. The Overman uses their will to dominate others' minds even after their death. Schmidt, as the Red Skull, sees himself as a superior being with godlike powers, granting him the right to rule. Despite physical enhancements from the Super Soldier Serum, the serum also deforms his face, amplifying his

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<sup>26</sup> Evans, "Marvel: 10 Weird Details You Didn't Know about the Hydra Logo."

<sup>27</sup> "German 'Nazi' Swastika Flag."

<sup>28</sup> Evans, "Marvel: 10 Weird Details You Didn't Know about the Hydra Logo."

evil traits as a cunning and formidable mastermind of warfare and science. He conceals his deformity behind a mask but elaborates on his ideology to Captain America, rejecting national boundaries and asserting the power of gods. Captain America rejects Schmidt's offer, but Schmidt continues to assert his viewpoint.<sup>29</sup>

Schmidt tries to convince Rogers that he is no simple soldier, and that Rogers is afraid to admit it. Schmidt is proud of being powerful and embraces it proudly and without fear. He also explained his plan for a world without flags united under his rule. Indeed, before the U.S. joined the Allies in their fight against the Axis, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) delivered a speech on March 15, 1941, where he spoke about Germany's New World Order, recognizing the threat Hitler posed to the democratic countries, including the U.S. FDR was aware of it when he exposed the real goal behind Hitler's ambitions to rule the world. In his speech, he argued that,

[...] Nazi forces are not seeking mere modifications in colonial maps or minor European boundaries. They openly seek the destruction of all electoral systems of government on every continent, including our own. They seek to establish government systems based on the regimentation of all human beings by a handful of individual rulers who seize power by force.<sup>30</sup>

President FDR explained what Nazis call New Order: it is not ordering. For order to be achieved, there must be justice. He continues to explain that "humanity will never permanently accept a system imposed by conquest and based on slavery. These modern tyrants find it necessary for their plans to eliminate all democracies—eliminate them one by one. The nations of Europe, and indeed we, ourselves, did not appreciate that purpose. We do now."<sup>31</sup> Comparing both Roosevelt's statement and what Schmidt admitted to Captain America, it is evident that Schmidt shares the same dreams as Nazi Germany, therefore, represents it.

The Marvel Universe presents controversial similarities between Hydra and Nazism, as well as between Hitler and Schmidt. The "Heil" to Hitler and "Hail" to Hydra comparison raises debates and questions about whether Hydra is a Nazi organization. While Captain America's comic book was created to fight Nazi Germany during WWII, the portrayal of Hydra in the movie differs from the original comic. Hydra, a fictional terrorist organization, shares

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<sup>29</sup> *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dir. Joe Johnston, Perf. Chris Evans and Hugo Weaving, 2011, DISNEY PLUS, scenes taken at (01:06:25–01:06:47) and (01:44:01–01:44:15).

<sup>30</sup> Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War*, 632.

<sup>31</sup> Fussell, 635.



characteristics with Nazi Germany, such as weapons, scientific advancements, power, and vigilance, and their uniforms resemble Nazi attire, albeit with a different logo.

During WWII, when Germany was at its peak between 1939 and 1941, and Britain was left to fight them, Captain America's comic book gained popularity in the U.S., contributing to a shift in public opinion towards supporting the Allies. The comic book encouraged interventionism after Germany's invasion of France, Italy, and Belgium. Captain America's emergence as a symbol of freedom fighting coincided with the U.S. being seen as "the Great Arsenal of Democracy," as President FDR described it, influencing public opinion towards interventionism in the face of tyranny.

In the movie, it seems that the filmmakers displayed Captain America as a "Nazi Fighter" without having him fight the Nazis but "punching" Hitler over two thousand times in his entertaining shows.<sup>32</sup> It seems confusing that Hitler was never shown in the movie; however, in the entertaining shows, someone played his role as the enemy while Captain America fought him several times. *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) is a faithful adaptation of the 1941 Captain America comic book. The narrative places the movie within its historical context but contains some elements representing the current epoch's atmosphere.

### **Cinematic Representation of 9/11**

The analysis of the superhero and the supervillain as representatives of both the U.S. and Nazi Germany in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) in post-9/11 times shows that the American film industry is still revisiting past events and remolding them to cope with the contemporary situation. Smelser argues that the American reaction to 9/11 events contains "a certain old-fashioned quality to it: a reassertion of the virtues of nation and community; unashamed flag-waving patriotism; a feeling that we, as Americans, under attack, were one again; and a feeling of pride in the American way of life, its values, its culture, and its democracy."<sup>33</sup> From here, one notices the importance of repeating U.S. past victories during the post-9/11 period for that it reassured the American collective identity and strengthened the feelings of patriotism. It brings feelings of nostalgia to the pre-Vietnam atmosphere of pride and invincibility.

Additional elements alluding to 9/11 in *The First Avenger* (2011) support this research's central argument: the binary opposition between the hero and the villain influences the

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<sup>32</sup> *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dir. Joe Johnston, Perf. Chris Evans and Hugo Weaving, 2011, DISNEY PLUS, scene (01:01:18–01:01:22).

<sup>33</sup> Smelser, "Epilogue: September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma," 270.

American collective identity in the post-9/11 attacks. The reproduction and reconstruction of past events in films produced after 9/11 have affected American collective identity. Indeed, reproducing past U.S. victories in movies sends a message of reassurance about the nation's unity and pride. Coogan argues that there is a difference between comic books and movie adaptations because superhero movies are not based on novels or specific texts. The reason behind the success of superhero movies is the use of resonant tropes. That is,

Every Superhero, particularly the ones who have been around for decades, has certain tropes—familiar and repeated moments, iconic images and actions, figures of speech, and patterns of characterization that have resonance; that is, they embody or symbolize some aspects of the character, and have gained this resonance through repeated use by storytellers<sup>34</sup>.

For Captain America, one of these moments occurs during the story of his transformation into a Super-Soldier. Over the years, this moment was repeated in the retellings of Captain America's origin. The most important moments in superhero films remain unchanged, whereas film directors can change the details without affecting the character's trope.

Captain America of the comic book does, indeed, represent the U.S. during WWII against its enemy, Nazi Germany. However, in the movie, he saves the country from an imminent attack: He learns about the ultimate plan of the Red Skull, which is to attack the U.S. He leads an attack on Hydra's base in the Alps and tries to stop the Red Skull's plan. With the fight between Hydra's followers and Captain America's fellow soldiers at its peak, the Red Skull gets onto the *Valkyrie*, Hydra's massive aircraft bomber, and heads toward the U.S. coast. In the meantime, Captain America managed to follow him and get into the plane at the last minute. When he gets onto the plane, he sees three bombs ready to be dropped over Boston, Chicago, and New York.<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary filmmakers strive to adapt old ideas to the post-9/11 era, necessitating adjustments to bring movies up to date.<sup>36</sup> These changes are vital for aligning the film with its contextual backdrop. Moreover, Michael C. Frank presents a model of the cultural imaginary of terrorism in his book *The Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism in Public Discourse, Literature, and Film: Narrating Terror*. His model builds upon Graham Dawson's definition of cultural

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<sup>34</sup> Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dir. Joe Johnston, Perf. Chris Evans and Hugo Weaving, 2011, DISNEY PLUS, scene (01:40:00–01:40:20).

<sup>36</sup> Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, 11.

imaginaries as extensive networks of interconnected discursive themes, images, motifs, and narrative structures publicly available within a culture, reflecting its psychological and social dimensions.<sup>37</sup> Frank's study explores the dynamic interplay between reality, fiction, and terrorism discourse, analyzing literary and cinematic works predating and following 9/11. He emphasizes the indispensability of the imaginary in counter-terrorism discourse as it enables individuals to cultivate their imagination to prevent potential collective traumas in the events of similar attacks.

Frank believes that "post-9/11 counterterrorism discourse [...] has made the imaginary an integral feature of homeland defense and thus a basis for political practice."<sup>38</sup> In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 2001, the Bush administration established a security discourse based on prevention—a paradigm shift processing uncertain and unreal threats.

Frank argues that this new security discourse on counterterrorism should include more than facts and data concerning goals, strategies, and means used in the attacks and the imagination of possible present and future events. His model of the cultural imaginary of terrorism suggests that the imaginary help prevent the nation's collective traumas resulting from a possible future terrorist attack by preparing the people psychologically and providing as many scenarios as possible. Besides analyzing facts, the security discourse aims to secure the nation's imagination by brainstorming possible attacks on the country and providing solutions.

The Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, argued in a speech on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2002, that the U.S. military needs transformation. He continues to wonder,

Who would have imagined only a few months ago that terrorists would take commercial airliners, turn them into missiles and use them to strike the Pentagon and the World Trade Towers, killing thousands? But it happened. And let there be no doubt, in the years ahead, it is likely that we will be surprised again by new adversaries who may also strike in unexpected ways. And as they gain access to weapons of increasing power—and let there be no doubt but that they are—their attacks will grow vastly more deadly than those we suffered several months ago. Our challenge in this new century is a difficult one. It's really to prepare to defend our nation against the unknown, the uncertain, and what we must understand will be the unexpected.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dawson's definition of cultural imaginaries, quoted in Frank 2017, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Frank, "At War with the Unknown," 485.

<sup>39</sup> "Secretary Rumsfeld," "31 January 2002," 2.

Interestingly, Rumsfeld described the attack as “unimaginable,” resulting in a collective shock because people could neither expect nor imagine such an attack. He discussed “new adversaries” by emphasizing the difference between the new century’s unpredictable enemies and the old predictable ones. Rumsfeld continues to assert that the U.S. military can no longer resort to the old methods used with old predictable enemies by justifying and supporting the new defensive strategy of preemptive attack, a strategy used to attack Iraq. He explicitly calls for preemption: “[W]e have to put aside the comfortable ways of thinking and planning, take risks and try new things so that we can prepare our forces to deter and defeat adversaries that have not yet emerged to challenges.”<sup>40</sup> His speech was part of the more significant new security discourse in the post-9/11 attacks by focusing on a significant point: he wanted to prepare the U.S. citizens for future attacks orchestrated by unknown enemies, which could be much worse than the 9/11 attacks.

In the aftermath of the attack, sociologist Frank Furedi argues that the acquisition of counterterrorism intelligence was repeatedly described as “a problem of imagination rather than of information.”<sup>41</sup> The creation of imaginative scenarios soon became an official means of complementing—and, if necessary, substituting for—observation and analysis, a trend that Furedi recognizes as “a tendency to overlook or minimize the role of research, reasoning, and analytical thinking for making sense of this subject.”<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, counterterrorism discourse not only relied on collective data on the goals and strategies of terrorists, but it also depended on exposing the nation’s imagination to possible present and future threats. Furedi thinks that “imagining evil [was] presented as the medium through which understanding of the terrorist threat may be gained [...] which makes the difference between actual and fictional threats increasingly difficult to discern.”<sup>43</sup> As a result, Homeland Security turned to Hollywood screenwriters and directors to help with creating imaginary attacks because it is believed that “Hollywood’s take on terrorism in the 90s [...] was absolutely more acute than virtually any intelligence report I read when I was in the Pentagon [comment by retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters].”<sup>44</sup>

According to Michael C. Frank, before 9/11, popular literature and Hollywood movies were considered to provide better assessments of future threats than intelligence agencies.

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<sup>40</sup> “Secretary Rumsfeld,” “31 January 2002,” 3.

<sup>41</sup> Furedi, *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown*, xxiv.

<sup>42</sup> Furedi, xxvii.

<sup>43</sup> Furedi, *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown*, xxvi.

<sup>44</sup> Furedi, xxvii.

Following the 9/11 attacks, government intelligence specialists collaborated with top Hollywood filmmakers and writers to brainstorm possible terrorist scenarios and devise solutions to counter those threats. This emphasis on imagination and creating “what if” scenarios aimed to avoid trauma and address failures in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management revealed by the 9/11 attacks.

Media scholar Richard Grusin, in his book *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*, argues that premediation, through imagining various scenarios, eliminates the category of the unimaginable. This perpetual exercise of imagination creates a constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack, preventing citizens of the global media sphere from experiencing the systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11.

*Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) contains visual elements connoting the 9/11 attacks, like the airplane, New York City, and an archvillain. This part focuses on the camera movements and the visual elements relevant to the current hypothesis. Camera angles affect the messages the director wants to deliver to the audience. In this scene, the camera moves in a way to show the three bombs differently: the film director Joe Johnston uses a high camera angle when showing both the bombs with the labels Chicago and Boston next to each other within the same frame to diminish and make the object less important (as shown in Figure 3).<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 3. The High Camera Angle of Chicago and Boston's bombs**

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<sup>45</sup> *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dir. Joe Johnston, Perf. Chris Evans and Hugo Weaving, 2011, DISNEY PLUS, shot taken at (01:40:08).

He then uses another high-angle shot to show another bomb with the label New York (see Figure 4).<sup>46</sup> The camera angle focuses on the New York bomb more than the other two because it is more important for Captain America since he is from Brooklyn, New York. This scene is accompanied by tense and threatening music, which makes the situation very dangerous. Figure 4 can be seen as a direct link to the events of 9/11: in reality, the 9/11 attacks were a series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks carried out by a terrorist organization called Al Qaeda, whereas, in the movie *The Red Skull* planned a series of aerial suicide attacks on different U.S. cities starting with Boston, Chicago, and New York. The difference between real and imagined events is that the enemy succeeded in their attacks. At the same time, in the movie, Captain America manages to save the cities and especially New York, by sacrificing his life for the greater good of the American people.



**Figure 4. High Camera Angle Shot of New York's Bomb**

The next shot in this scene is a single low-angle shot of Captain America. The camera focuses on his facial expressions, which indicate he is very concerned about his mission to save his country, especially New York. While on the *Valkyrie* heading towards the U.S. to destroy it, Captain America prevented bombs directed by pilots towards many cities, including New York. Bombs were bearing names of U.S. cities. One of the enemy's pilots took off with the bomb, but Captain America jumped over it and redirected it toward its origin, the Red Skull's colossal plane. It is no coincidence that Captain America prevented an imminent threat that resembles the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. This element existed neither in the

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<sup>46</sup>*Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dir. Joe Johnston, Perf. Chris Evans and Hugo Weaving, 2011, DISNEY PLUS, shot taken at (01:40:12).

original version of the comic book nor in *Captain America* (in its 1990s version). The binary opposition between Captain America and the Red Skull lays the ground for understanding the metaphorical usage of these two main characters in *The First Avenger*. These metaphors are necessary for understanding and contextualizing the narrative in its historical context.

## Conclusion

This research introduces *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) as a medium through which national identity scripts are narrated. Whether intentional or unintentional, cinematic representations of American national identity have a certain degree of reality; based on Alexander's concept of cultural trauma, individuals can be affected by reconstructed traumas or events that have not yet occurred. The use of different theories in this research aims to prove this hypothesis. I integrated various strands of theory from multidisciplinary research areas to contribute to new grounds in studying popular culture in relation to identity and geopolitics. Combining Anderson's Imagined Communities, Strauss' Binary Opposites, Alexander's cultural trauma, and Frank's cultural imaginary, I can say that through movies where the hero holds the same identity as the viewer, the process of identification takes place, and the viewer develops certain feelings as part of the gratification process.<sup>47</sup> The viewer seeks to satisfy specific needs, such as overcoming cultural trauma and preparing for the unexpected to build popular resilience.

The cultural imaginary of terrorism and counterterrorism is a new way to connect cinematic representations of identity and U.S. foreign policy visible. Although the U.S. has had many enemies throughout history, the confrontations between American heroes and foreign villains, though the goal seems to be entertainment, relate tremendously to reality. My analysis results suggest that the two characters' binary opposition, where the heroes are identified as Americans and the villains as outsiders, reinforces American national identity during collective trauma experiences. According to Frank, "the pivotal task here [in these scenarios] is to anticipate—on the basis of fact and conjecture—who could strike [,] when [,] where [,] and

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<sup>47</sup> According to the Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) is a communication theory that deals with the effects of the media on people. According to communication.org, UGT "explains how people use the media for their own need and get satisfied when their needs are fulfilled." Source: "Communication Theory-Uses and Gratification Theory." Communication Theory, <https://www.communicationtheory.org/uses-and-gratification-theory/>, accessed August 4, 2023.

how.”<sup>48</sup> It seems extremely important to imagine the perpetrators of the imaginary attacks to perceive any future threat to the nation.

The multi-method analysis of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) reveals a multifaceted portrayal of the character and its significance in various contexts. The analysis of the binary opposition between the superhero and the supervillain suggests a complementary relation between both characters who symbolize the U.S. fight against its adversaries. The symbolic meaning of the binary opposition between the hero and the villain is associated with “[...] the production and consumption of popular culture, which leads to the internalization of the mythic and symbolic aspects of national identities.”<sup>49</sup>

Through the lens of cultural trauma, the movie highlights the impact of historical events, such as the 9/11 attacks on national identity. It also implies the importance of symbols in reinforcing collective identity and nationalism. Examining Captain America’s character from the perspective of Judith Jordan’s Relational-Cultural Theory emphasizes the importance of belongingness and connections. Hitherto, Captain America’s journey from a weak and marginalized individual to a national symbol of courage and patriotism resonates with the American audience’s desire for a unifying hero during times of national crisis. Overall, the movie weaves together multiple conceptual frameworks to explore themes of identity, cultural trauma, heroism, villainy, and symbolism.

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<sup>48</sup> Frank, *The Cultural Imaginary of Terrorism in Public Discourse, Literature, and Film: Narrating Terror*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Dittmer, “Captain America in the News,” 626.



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