Ablenationalists assemble! On disability in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Superheroes are often disabled, either literally or metaphorically. Their exceptional powers and abilities may be balanced by weakness in order to engender audience sympathy or identification, or to provide a source of narrative obstacles. Although superhero stories are not necessarily *about* disability, they have become one of the most accessible and popular formats in which disability is a consistently salient trope and integral part of the narrative machinery. This essay argues that the use of disability in current superhero narratives, exemplified by the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), is best understood through the theoretical lens of narrative prosthesis and ablenationalism. In the MCU, a core function of disability is to provide heroes with a yearning for normality and a desire to be productive members of a community. The interlinked narratives of the MCU effectively depicts many of its protagonists as supercrips, framing disability as intrinsically linked to a heroic struggle to fit in with non-disabled society.

Key words: Superheroes, ablenationalism, supercrip, narrative prosthesis, Marvel Cinematic Universe

1. Introduction: With great power comes great vulnerability

Superhero stories are often also disability stories, either explicitly or implicitly. There are many reasons why this is the case, to the extent that the figure of the disabled superhero appears to be overdetermined. Superheroes may be made disabled in order to provide a course of narrative obstacles, in order to create grounds for audience sympathy and identification, and in order to establish a moral universe in which bad things do not happen to good people randomly, but in order to provide them with a sense of purpose.

These reasons are compatible, and have in common a notion of moral and narrative symmetry. Superheroes are, by definition, more powerful than ordinary humans, but they must also, as a rule, have a significant weakness. That weakness may be supernatural, as with Superman's vulnerable to kryptonite, or it may be psychological, as with Batman's childhood trauma of seeing his parents killed. The former example makes it possible for an invulnerable hero to be in actual danger, while the latter provides motive and motivation for embarking on heroic pursuits.

Some creators of superheroes have found disability to be a versatile and useful device of characterization for serving both of these functions. First, the contrast between super-ability and dis-ability – being able to do something that no-one else can, while also lacking an ability that almost everybody has – is inherently striking. Second, a disabled protagonist, like most superheroes, is a natural outsider; a common synonym for "superhero" is "vigilante", someone acting outside of social norms and without legal authority.

Consider two superheroes who are explicitly disabled. In comic books published by Marvel, and created or co-created by Stan Lee, we find the visually impaired Daredevil and the paraplegic Professor X. For both, their special powers are in some way compensatory of or symmetric to their disability. Professor X has telepathic abilities to offset his physical impairment, while Daredevil's lack of sight is matched by his sense of echolocation, similar to that of bats. They operate outside mainstream society – Daredevil by pursuing by night the criminals he is unable to legally punish by day, Professor X by establishing a covert educational institution for 'mutants' like himself.

Stan Lee's formula has proved a durable source of sympathetic superheroes. As adaptations of Marvel comic books have evolved from being ridiculous, poorly made B-movies like *Captain America* (1990) and expensive flops like *Howard the Duck* (1986) into the popular and slickly produced blockbusters of the 2000s and 2010s, the power/vulnerability nexus has remained, rounding out characters that would otherwise be very difficult for audiences to understand or feel emotionally connected to. The resulting Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), whose representations and framings of disability is the main topic of this essay, consists of films and television series based on and featuring characters from Marvel comic books – and it has been extensively praised for portraying its heroes as more fully human and engaging than those of the rival DC Universe.

The MCU is a highly complex narrative structure. The original comic books were themselves collaborative works, created from the efforts of now-famous writers like Stan Lee, artists like Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby, and a multitude of unsung editors, pencilers, editors, and so on, but the MCU is to an even greater degree a multi-authored body of work, involving scores of professions and thousands of professionals. If any single agent can be considered its primary author, that would have to be either Kevin Feige, the president of Marvel Studios who has overseen the majority of the works in the MCU – or the disembodied entity called the Walt Disney Corporation, owner of Marvel Studios.

The representations to be analysed in the following should therefore not be considered the expression of any single authorial point of view – even that of Stan Lee – but rather as part of the machinery that has produced a number of, commercially speaking, fantastically successful movies. At the time of writing, 10 out of the 25 all-time highest-grossing motion pictures worldwide are stories about superheroes, while 3 of the top 10 are the *Avengers* movies – central parts of the MCU (Wikipedia, "List of Highest-Grossing Films").

The first three "phases" of the MCU consists of 22 full-length movies released over the course of 11 years, from *Iron Man* (2008) through *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). These works, interlinked by narrative action and by actors performing the same roles in different stories, will be my main source of empirical material. They have been overseen by a relatively stable constellation of people and corporate entities (Wikipedia, "List of Marvel Cinematic Universe Films"), even as they have drawn on the talents of a fairly diverse range of actors, directors, cinematographers, and so on – and have borrowed stylistically from a heterogeneous set of film genres, including action-thriller (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier)*, space opera (*Guardians of the Galaxy*), and stoner comedy (*Thor: Ragnarok*).

While the MCU can be treated as a single, hugely profitable narrative complex, it can also be viewed as a cultural subfield in itself, an arena that allows for the exploration of many different themes – so long as the result is marketable and likely to be profitable. Soon I will explore the themes and stories of the MCU as they related to disability. First, though, I will need to address on a more general basis the relationship between superheroes and disability, that is, between the silly and the serious.

2.   *Why so serious? Complex embodiment in a cartoonish context*

The, well, cartoonish nature of most superhero stories may appear to undercut their relevance to our understanding of the real-world phenomenon of disability. I will nevertheless attempt to discern this relevance, on the grounds that the signification of a social field is always important (Weiss and Wodak; Fairclough), even when the signification distorts the field rather heavily.

In point of fact, the degree of distortion to be considered here is not unique to the relationship between disability and superheroes. It applies to the relationship between disability and many forms of representation. Historically speaking, disability has been signified in any number of distorted ways; the canon of filmic and literary representations of disability is something of a funhouse (Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability*; Snyder and Mitchell, *Narrative Prosthesis : Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*). Superhero narratives are interesting because they distort the reality of complex embodiment in a particular, and particularly popular, way.

The second argument is related to the first by way of the superhero narratives ubiquity and heterogeneity. In some cases, including that of Christopher Nolan's trilogy of Batman films (2005-2012) but most saliently that of Todd Phillips' *Joker* (2019), superhero stories have been treated as serious commentaries upon current social problems – in the case of *Joker*, that of white male alienation and violence. This kind of analysis is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: if superhero stories are treated by a sufficient number of people *as if* they were significant, their significance becomes a social fact. And although the MCU is, generally speaking, much lighter in tone than the works discussed in this paragraph, I will argue that their underlying thematic concerns are equally significant to those in the "darker" DC universe.

Arguably, the uneasy relationship between the silly and the serious is a constitutive feature of superhero narratives. The first significant format in which such stories were told was pulp magazines – entertainment at its most disposable – but such stories were, for a long time, thought unfit for consumption because of the moral danger they posed (Tilley; Springhall). While they belonged to the margins of culture, and were presumed to be of marginal analytical interest, they were also presumed to harbour great destructive potential, and so had to be taken seriously after all.

Against the backdrop of this unstable and ambiguous relationship with moral seriousness, superhero narratives have been interpreted as metaphors for a number of socio-political issues, as well as having treated such issues directly. The first major superhero, Superman, was a being from another planet who grew up in rural America, and can be viewed as a fantasy of Jewish immigrant acceptance, a topic explored both in works of history and fiction (Brod; Chabon). In the 1940s, the radio version of the character battled the Ku Klux Klan, in stories that were used to expose the Klan's actual code words and secret rituals (Bowers).

Superman's relationship to disability, too, straddles the divide between fiction and fact. Christopher Reeve's light-as-air portrayal of Superman in four full-length motion pictures (1978-1987) is difficult now to separate from his real-world disability following a horse-riding accident in 1995. The contrast between the invulnerable character portrayed on film and the actor's vulnerable body serves as a reminder that even the most fantastical characters –

monsters and gods alike – necessarily bear some relationship to the mundanely human. Reeve's conflict-ridden relationship with the disability movement (McRuer and Mollow; Clare; Goggin and Newell), was arguably made that much worse by his status as an icon of bodily perfection.

Reeve's own activism, always a version of the 'quest for a cure', reminds us of the problematic but enduring link between disability and heroism that has been codified as the 'supercrip' (Norden). This figure, perhaps particularly familiar from the world of sports (Kama; Silva and Howe; Hardin and Hardin), represents extraordinary embodiment as heroic spectacle, while also imposing a duty of heroic struggle. Paralympic athletes are framed as being both more and less than ordinary people; capable of supremely impressive feats of athleticism, they are nevertheless framed as being incapable of normality. In this way they are close kin to certain superheroes, perhaps particularly those of the Stan Lee variety.

Superheroes are, of course, not only stand-ins for disabled people. In the 1960s, the mutant X-Men were conceived more or less explicitly as metaphorical representatives of ethnic minorities in the United States (Darowski). Their animalized or monstrous embodiment (in characters such as Wolverine, Beast, and Cyclops) was, effectively, a caricature of what African-Americans, particularly, were thought to be in racist ideology. In the early 2000s, however, Bryan Singer's *X-Men* films demonstrated that these characters might just as easily be representative of LGBT experience (Bartlett). *X2* (2003) features a classically constructed coming-out scene, in which the character Iceman is nervously accepted as a mutant by his parents, while his younger brother reacts with fear and disgust.

Superheroes, then, are supersaturated with the potential for making meaning; the problem is to avoid confirmation bias in seeing only one's "own" minority reflected in this particular mirror (Lund). Still, almost by definition, a superhero must have nontypical embodiment. He or she must transcend the restrictions of typical embodiment; if this was not the case, we would be talking simply about *heroes*. And the structural logic of narrative demands that a protagonist should not simply be extraordinarily powerful.

Disability, then, is intrinsic to the superhero story, both in its 'in-universe', fantastical version, and as a real-world interpretive resource. These dynamics have of course already been explored to some extent. I build in this article on work cited above, but also on that of Alaniz (2014) – and on the self-reflexive comments included in the superhero stories themselves. From the Silver Age of comics onwards, these stories routinely engage with tropes of postmodern self-awareness and intertextuality, with characters such as Deadpool breaking the fourth wall and commenting on the materiality of their narrative formats, even demonstrating awareness that are walking, flying and wall-crawling metaphors.

Before proceeding with my analysis, I'll note that I have two interrelated goals for this essay, both of which have to do with constructing a 'theory' in the sense that it is understood, somewhat tongue in cheek, by Gabriel Abend: "an original 'interpretation,' 'reading,' or 'way of making sense' of a certain slice of the empirical world" (Abend 178). My first goal is to explore how contemporary superhero stories, as exemplified by the MCU, align with other powerful cultural forces to suggest particular frames for understanding real-world impairments and disabilities. These frames, I believe, are neither wholly malignant or wholly

benign, but they are ideological and are likely to have, to the extent that they become internalized and naturalized, socio-political consequences in fields ranging from work through health to everyday life. Such frames help to impose general constraints upon what constitutes a meaningful life as a disabled person.

Secondly, I will try to separate the necessary from the contingent when it comes to superhero stories. As I have pointed out, they exhibit considerable thematic range and interpretive potential. The stories we are currently being told result from choices that have been made, collectively, by corporate entities and a myriad of authors. The outcome of those choices tell us something particular about *our* universe. Here, the cultural-narrative investigations of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (Narrative Prosthesis; Cultural Locations of Disability) will be of particular use. In terms of examples, Mitchell and Snyder have largely been concerned with works of the Western canon and the avant-garde, but I believe that some of their key concepts, in particular that of *ablenationalism*, will prove crucial in showing how superhero stories, at this particular moment, are often about how the extraordinarily embodied yearn to be *useful* as well as *normal.*

3. Normalizing the superhero: The MCU and its narrative architecture

The overall shape of the story being told in the MCU is, not surprisingly, that of epic struggle. The concluding pair of films, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)*, centre on the superhero team's fight against the evil demigod Thanos, who is bent on destroying half of all life in the universe because of an overly literal interpretation of Malthusian demographics. Thanos is of course defeated, but at the cost of the lives of many of the heroes, lending some emotional weight to the proceedings.

The most significant among the heroic dead is Iron Man, a.k.a. the industrialist and inventor Tony Stark. He is the protagonist of three eponymous films, the first of which inaugurated the MCU in 2008. As the narrative universe expanded, Iron Man, previously something of a minor Marvel character, proved to be a fan favourite. This was partly due to the near-perfect casting of Robert Downey Jr. in the role, but likely also because Iron Man effectively combines superhuman prowess, skill, and powers with human vulnerability.

Moreover, he is explicitly disabled. Attacked and kidnapped by mercenaries in the Central Asian desert, he is severely injured. He constructs a miniature reactor and a powered metal suit not only as a means of escape and vengeance, but in order simply to survive. The energy source that powers his exceptional prosthetics is also a medical device that prevents embedded shrapnel from reaching Stark's heart. The cold, egotistical arms manufacturer is made human and heroic through impairment.

Tony Stark's quest is essentially one for redemption – from past moral transgressions by means of physical suffering. In *Avengers: Endgame*, his narrative arc is completed through the ultimate sacrifice. He gives his life so that half the universe may live. Significantly, he leaves behind his wife and his daughter. Unlike another Avenger with a family, Hawkeye, Iron Man is unable to achieve his dream of integrated family life. But then Hawkeye, dismissed by fans as a truly boring character, lacks a clearly delineated weakness. He suffers

from some form of vaguely understood trauma, but he is neither as damaged nor as flamboyantly heroic as Stark.

The story of Iron Man can be viewed as a classic *rehabilitation* story (Stiker; Tremain). The 2008 film is replete with scenes of Tony Stark acquiring new capabilities of mobility. He interacts with prosthetics and machinery, learns to enact a new form of complex embodiment, and gradually develops a social role in which to display it. Having embraced this role, he takes the next step of acquiring friends and developing romantic attachments. Finally, however, he is not integrated into society, but dies protecting it.

By contrast, the rehabilitation story that completes Christopher Nolan's trilogy of Batman films, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), ends with the symbolic death of Batman and the normalization of his alter ego, Bruce Wayne. This death must necessarily be temporary, since without Batman there can be no more Batman movies, while the death of Iron Man is made possible by the collective of the Avengers. By the end of the current phase of the MCU this collective has become a fully-fledged, state-supported institution. In large sections of the story, in fact, it is a *total* institution, providing – in a rural setting – living quarters, useful employment, and a social life for its members.

A conflicted but ultimately positive view of institutions, authority, and the state is arguably central to the MCU. This is not a given for superhero stories, and is particularly surprising for Marvel stories. Their characters were mostly created in the 1960s, were often influenced by the U.S. counterculture. Scepticism towards authority figures and majority society were recurrent themes, in *Spider-Man* as well as *X-Men* titles. The MCU of the 2000s and 2010s, however, sees the state and its representatives not as entities to be overthrown, but as sources of legitimacy. When the government agency with which the Avengers are affiliated turns bad, it is because of infiltration by evil individuals, not because of the structural evils of the military-industrial complex.

Within this ideological framework, a concern with personal growth runs throughout the MCU. The protagonists have a variety of backgrounds. Some are humans changed into superheroes by science (the Hulk, Spider-Man, Captain American), some are extra-terrestrials (Thor), some are artificially created beings (Vision). Usually their origins are traumatic, and they strive to establish a functional social role for themselves. This striving is humanizing. Despite their fantastical powers, their fundamental emotional struggle resembles that of many human viewers. The interesting finding is that the goal posts set by the films are profoundly conservative, leading to a curious diminishment of the superheroes. Their extraordinary embodiment allows them to save the world, but it is incompatible with the kind of normalization that leads to happiness. Here, the fate of Christopher Nolan's Batman dovetails with that of Tony Stark. The closing scene of *The Dark Knight Rises* shows Bruce Wayne content, sitting in a café, trauma left behind. Stark's last words: *I am Iron Man.*

4. *Narrative prosthesis redux: balance and distinction*

There are theoretical and structural arguments to be made for why a super-powered character "cannot exist without the underlying rationale of a disabled, structuring Other - crucially, an Other that must literally and routinely be made to *vanish from sight*."

(Alaniz, unpaginated e-book). The previously mentioned Stan Lee trademark, i.e. making sure that the heroes were "flawed" and therefore more narratively interesting, also served to "stimulate sympathy, enhance psychological depth and raise the dramatic stakes." (Alaniz, unpaginated e-book)

This analysis comes close to replicating the disability studies concept of *narrative prosthesis*, familiar from the work of Snyder and Mitchell: "Disability provides a common formula for differentiating a character's uniqueness through the identifying features of physical and behavioural "quirks" or idiosyncrasies." (*Narrative Prosthesis : Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* 10). As a general, normative principle, narrative prosthesis is problematic because of its insensitivity to subjectivity. Snyder and Mitchell focus their critique on the responsibilities involved in representation, arguing that narratives that invoke disability should also represent "complex disability subjectivity":

> Yet, while disability often marks a protagonist's difference and is the impetus to narrate a story in the first place, a complex disability subjectivity is not developed in the ensuing narrative. [... Disability] supplies a multiple utility to literary characterizations, even while literature abandons a serious contemplation of the difference that disability makes as a socially negotiated identity. (Snyder and Mitchell, *Narrative Prosthesis : Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* 10)

This logic holds for canonical works of literature, and perhaps for any narrative art form that aspires to complexity. But does it hold for superhero stories? Being broadly conceived popular entertainment, they are not necessarily interested in complex subjectivities of *any* kind – rather, they are at heart commercial properties. The MCU is one of several brands in the Disney portfolio. They are one particularly salient example of franchise-driven cinema, where a single "universe" can be explored (and exploited) for multiple narratives, and attendant spin-off stories in other, less expensive formats as well as supplementary products. The franchise market favours fantastic or supernatural narratives. On the blockbuster chart, the chief rival to the MCU is the *Star Wars* series, also owned by Disney. In such narratives, realism can be taken as being fundamentally beside the point.

If this is the case, then we should not ask whether disability is represented *accurately* in superhero stories. Clearly, it isn't, but neither is government bureaucracy or the laws of physics. Bérubé (2005) cautions against too-literal readings of disability representations in *any* narrative, and his argument applies particularly to fantastical narratives. If disability is not deployed as a *uniquely* simplistic trope, there is no a priori reason to find its use suspect.

However, another and more salient point of critique – that of narrative determinism – stems from Snyder and Mitchell's work as well as that of Siebers (Disability Aesthetics). In the MCU, as exemplified by the story of Iron Man, disability can be a necessary and sufficient reason for the arc of tragedy. And the telling of such stories tends to carry both moral lessons and ideological implications, about the value and purpose of lives of extraordinary embodiment. For Snyder and Mitchell, one of the essential problems with narrative prosthesis is that it reduces disabled characters to *functions*. Deprived of complex subjectivity, they – and by implication real disabled people – are not only deprived of full subjecthood, but have the shape and purpose of their lives determined by their disability.

Here, both superhero narratives in general and the particular example of the MCU are much too heterogeneous to be analysed as a single entity. There are countless versions of Iron Many; the MCU version just happens to be the one that has had the biggest audience. But this does not eliminate the problem of determinism once that problem has been identified. The narrative links between a particular form of embodiment, a particular moral character, and a predetermined narrative destiny is arguably just as problematic in superhero stories as in any other kind of story. It can even be viewed as *more* problematic in such contexts, because the fantastic framework allows for a demurral that is not available in realistic contexts. Villainous dark-skinned characters can be more easily identified as ideologically problematic than purple- or blue-skinned ones.

Determinism is related to mythos, in the sense that myths often serve to explain why things are as they are. Furthermore, a franchise universe is a mythical universe because it is fundamentally unchanging. Any single linear story may have an end, but the larger narrative universe can be perpetuated for as long as it makes its owners a profit. Hence, the MCU is populated mainly by clearly delineated mythological archetypes. Superheroes are often identified with primeval or elemental forces, with animals, or with another dominant signifier that tell the audience how to easily recognize them. The monsters and animals of the X-Men stand alongside Spider-Man's enemies Doctor Octopus, the Green Goblin, Electro, and the Rhino. The Thor of the MCU a version of the Norse deity; in the comic books he encounters members of his own pantheon as well as the Greco-Roman Hercules.

The link in superhero narratives between internal and external characteristics is itself overdetermined. In addition to the mythical/archetypal framework, it can be explained in terms of mid-20th century psychology; what is the Incredible Hulk if not an extreme example of somatization? In fact, the mechanisms at work here are so well-established that they have long-since been subjected to internal critique. Richard III self-consciously states, in the opening monologue of Shakespeare's play, that since he cannot play the lover because of his physical deformities, he will have to be the villain instead. This degree of self-awareness is shared by the villain in M. Night Shyamalan's 'realistic' superhero film *Unbreakable* (2000). Having osteogenesis imperfecta, a young comic book reader can only identify with its antagonists, and reinvents himself as the villainous Mr. Glass.

The MCU is far too complex to be wholly schematic. The Hulk, aka. Bruce Banner, struggles throughout the narrative to reconcile his green-skinned superhuman id with his human superego. In *Avengers: Endgame* he appears as an integrated and functional single personality. His new persona symbolized by the Hulk's immense body being clad in well-fitting clothes – and wearing eyeglasses. Tony Stark is both narratively distinguished and tragically determined by his impairment, but the overall theme of the films has even more to do with various forms of integration into and contribution to society. For the MCU, an equally important explanatory factor to narrative prosthesis can be found in *ablenationalism*.

5. *Productive members of society: Superheroes, supercrips and ablenationalism*

Ablenationalism (Mitchell and Snyder) is an ideology of limited accommodation and partial inclusion. It is society's way of 'solving' the problem of disability by lauding the role of the

able-disabled (Titchkosky); people with disabilities who are able to integrate and contribute without requiring or forcing major systemic change. Ablenationalism effectively conserves a personal tragedy model of disability, while allowing for certain individuals to escape this fate.

As an ideological construct, ablenationalism therefore seeks to counter the kind of systemic critique that comes from disability activism and disability studies (Oliver and Barnes; Shakespeare; Goodley; Davis). All contemporary theories of which I am aware disability locate at least some significant causes of disabled peoples' marginalization in social structures. Ablenationalism makes the argument that the social structures cannot be all that bad, given the existence of at least *some* successful disabled individuals. This argument may beg the question, but it has proved conducive to some very persuasive visual and narrative rhetoric. Through spectacles like the Paralympic Games, for instance, largely able-bodied audiences are given the opportunity to celebrate individual instances of embodied difference, on a time-limited and largely inconsequential basis.

The essence of ablenationalism is the imperative towards *fitting in*. As Mitchell and Snyder put it:

> As people with disabilities encounter the inflexibilities such as health care, religious gatherings, communities, workplaces, schools, families, and so on, such encounters increasingly depend upon the ability of some to "fit in" by passing as nondisabled, or, at least, not too disabled. [...] In particular, the degree to which disability does not significantly challenge the aesthetic ideals of a national imaginary dependent on fantasies of bodily wholeness and, if not perfection, a narrow range of normalcy. (Mitchell and Snyder 14)

At first glance, then, the relationship between ablenationalism and superheroes may not be obvious. And I do not think that this relationship is intrinsic to superhero narratives, but a peculiarly contemporary feature of the MCU. Here, the ideology of integration and normalization is contingent upon the identification of superheroes with supercrips. Supercrips feature centrally in ablenationalist ideology because of their ability to succeed through supreme individual effort, and to thus "transcend" the limitations of individualized disability. The tasks they undertake may be extraordinary, as in the athletic achievements of Paralympians, but they may also be mundane, related to everyday life – holding a job, raising a family, participating in society. Crucially, they remain vulnerable, subjects more to pity than to envy from able-bodied audiences. Unlike heroes like Superman, the MCU heroes come much closer to this status – while they can of course be the subjects of power fantasies, they are most often portrayed as leading lives that are not actually desirable.

Ablenationalism expressed through the figure of the supercrip thus has at least three repressive functions. First, it furthers the notion that only exceptional disabled people are of value. Second, it suggests that disabled people can and must perform before and ableist world. Third, it implies that true inclusion and normality is close to impossible for most disabled people, however desirable.

The supercrip figure thus has a function closely related to the figure of the *normate* (Garland-Thomson) – it functions as an ideological constraint upon the possibilities of meaning-making in the lives of disabled people. In addition, however, the concepts of

ablenationalism and supercrip are closely linked to *productivity*. Being a full citizen, that is, a valued and fully rights-bearing member of the community of a nation-state, means contributing. Being productive, i.e crossing the dividing line between the needs-based and the efforts-based economy that usually segregates disabled from non-disabled (Stone), turns out to be more important than being happy, since being productive is a measure of one's fundamental worth.

The supercrip is a protean figure. It shares a number of features not only with the able-disable, as well as with the 'cyborg' and the 'techno-marvel' (Norden). It bridges the gap between fiction and fact. Supercrips occur in media narratives about the real world as well as in science fiction and fantasy; their inescapable characteristic is that they are living and dying by the standards of the non-disabled majority.

Among superheroes who are not supercrips, we find Superman, Wonder Woman, and many others. Though they are vulnerable in some ways, they are closer in stature to gods than to humans, and they are not particular concerned with fitting in human society. As pointed by as early as 1965 (Feiffer), Clark Kent is not Superman's true identity, but a caricature of the human frailties that he himself does not share.

The MCU, however, is replete with supercrips. Beyond Tony Stark, there is Vision, the android or synthetic being who tries to approach normal human modes of socialization and behaviour. The Hulk, though he ultimately succeeds quite well in his performance of normality, does so essentially by *overcoming* the loss of cognitive function and emotional instability that is inherent to his condition. The story of the mystical Doctor Strange is also a rehabilitation story. Following a car accident, he loses the motor functions necessary to being a neurosurgeon. He must reinvent himself as a mystic and magician, and devote himself to protecting the world we know from interdimensional horrors.

Superheroes become ablenationalist supercrips, then, not only because they are disabled, but because their most significant struggles are about achieving and protecting normality at all costs. It is by doing so that they become productive, valued members of society. The narrative effect of all this is perhaps a little disheartening; it represents a narrowing of vision to the realistic and mundane in what is inherently a fantastical genre. Moreover, it imparts the dubious moral lesson that being disabled, even if one is also compensated with superpowers, entails submitting to the ideology of ablenationalism. The best one can aspire to is to be able-disabled; to be an exemplar.

5. *Narrowing the field of fantasy: a closing elegy*

Superheroes can be simple empowerment fantasies, and are sometimes explicitly so. DC Comics' Captain Marvel (also known, for complicated copyright reasons, as Shazam), is the alter ego of a young boy, Billy Batson. The child is physically weak, but the superman is strong – and he only has to speak aloud a magical word in order to be transformed. Certainly, this transformation represents an erasure of vulnerable embodiment and its attendant subjectivity. But the fantasy of the superhero also exemplifies a particular kind of freedom – from the laws of gravity, and, for the child, from adult control and supervision. It is the freedom of pure play and escapism.

The films of the MCU present superheroes that are far more grounded and constrained, while still adhering to a questionable moral symmetry. As superpowers must be paid for through vulnerability and pain, so can damage be compensated with ability. Thus disability is presented as necessary and meaningful, never incidental. There is a reason for Tony Stark's injuries: he must become Iron Man. Correspondingly, in the *X-Men* films, the paraplegic Professor X regains the ability to walk, but only at the cost of his telepathic abilities. The one requires the other.

In the real world, there is little correlation between intelligence and wheelchair use. In many superhero narratives, the correlation approaches 1. The implications this has for a general conception of embodiment are quite disturbing. Every injury must be borne, every burden carried, because it is required by the moral logic of the universe. And a karmically balanced society is profoundly resistant to social change.

This view of the world has been self-reflexively parodied within the superhero genre (this should not surprise us by now). Amazon's series *The Boys* (2019) ask what superheroes would look like if they were given powers not by the universe, but by the transnational corporation that employs them – if they were, inside the world of the story, the same kind of corporate brands that Spider-Man, Batman, and Superman actually are. This vision satirizes both the MC and DC universes, while appearing rather more realistic than both of them. Crucially, the 'heroes' make little attempt to fit in with the humans, but instead treat them as the powerful have usually treated the powerless. Great power does not entail great responsibility.

Are superhero narratives influencing popular attitudes towards disability? I cannot think of a good way to test this proposition, but I find it interesting to consider in closing some broader tendencies in the cultural climate, perhaps the most important of which is the pervasiveness of a form of socio-cultural utilitarianism.

It has become commonplace to describe every form of human diversity, both diversity of experience and diversity of embodiment as *valuable* – to society, to institutions, to workplaces. This argument legitimises the inclusion of a wide array of people, including disabled people, on the assumption that this will improve organizations or companies and make them more robust, flexible, and/or profitable.

This notion can of course co-exist with ideals of social justice, but it is an uncomfortable co-existence, since the assumption of value is unproven. The question remains – what if hiring more disabled people *isn't* good for most companies' bottom lines? What if disabled people, statistically speaking, *aren't* as productive as non-disabled people? What if all disabled people cannot, in fact, be supercrips?

Representations of disability in at least some salient superhero narratives now appear to align with the ideology of ablenationalism. This ideology requires disabled people to push themselves ever harder. When companies use superhero iconography in recruitment, they usually mean that they are looking for Stakhanovite workers. For most disabled people, this is an impossibly high standard to live up to. Superhero framings of disability can negate

accusations of malingering or lack of productivity (highly dangerous accusations in a time of deteriorating welfare states and economic instability), but at the cost of self-discipline and self-abnegation.

The superhero narratives of disability exemplified in the MCU presume that disability can be a meaningful part of one's identity; it can even give purpose to one's life. In the real world, however, disability can be experienced simply as a predicament (Shakespeare) or as a purely negative phenomenon. While there is currently a strong cultural tendency to impose positive interpretations or framings upon experiences that are difficult or troublesome, even traumatic or life-threatening (Ehrenreich), this serves as much to reinforce the social order as to alleviate marginality and disadvantage.

Superheroes aren't real physically speaking, but very much so culturally speaking. They are currently one of the most popular formats for telling stories to a mass audience, and they deserve attention on those grounds alone. Cinema is their primary medium, and cinema remains the most important medium for representing bodies in motion – extraordinary as well as ordinary bodies. In superhero narratives, so many tropes of disability culture are present as to stagger the viewer. There is damage, there is recovery, there is rehabilitation, there is the return to society. There is the search for identity and purpose. And through the use of these tropes, there is a link being forged, ever stronger, between special weaknesses and special abilities – between embodied difference, a special capacity for sacrifice, and the impossible desire for a curiously narrow form of 'normal life'.

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