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“DID I STEP ON YOUR MOMENT?”:
THE OBJECTIFICATION OF
THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE’S BLACK WIDOW

BY

Bryanna A. Martinez

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts
Creative Writing

REGIS UNIVERSITY

December 8, 2021

“DID I STEP ON YOUR MOMENT?”:
THE OBJECTIFICATION OF
THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE’S BLACK WIDOW

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Bryanna A. Martinez

has been approved

December 8, 2021

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To my mom, thank you for telling me to never give up. This is for us.

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Abstract

The objectification of the Marvel Cinematic Universe character Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow has been present through the films she has been in. She is merely a sex symbol and seen as just the pretty face, when she leads the Avengers by combat fighting, espionage tactics, and hacking into computers. By employing film theorist Laura Mulvey's the Male Gaze Theory, Hugo Ingrasci's theory of the antihero trope, Historian Barbara Hales' Theory of the *femme fatale* in film noir, author Michael Manahan's concepts of the antihero and societal implications, and Director Joey Soloway's notion of the Female Gaze theory we are to examine the character Black Widow from the Marvel Cinematic Universe through seven Marvel films. Additionally, this research includes interviews, outside source websites, and film posters. Each research section examines the mentioned theories by dissecting each movie to focus on the theory and film instead of the whole movie and theories included. Through these examples of the Male Gaze theory there were prevalent instances of Black Widow that display Mulvey's theories. Examples of the camera's angle direction, the dialogue between male and female characters, and the film posters that objectify the Marvel Cinematic Universe character. The character Black Widow visibly shows the *femme fatale* trope by displaying examples from the film noir genre, spy movies, and Barbara Hales' results of the *femme fatale* in film noir of the 1940-50s from certain scenes of certain movies. After evaluating Hugo J. Ingrasci's antihero trope, the character Black Widow exhibits traits of an antihero trope in multiple Marvel films. In Michael Manahan's concept of writing an antihero, the character Black Widow is seen as the antihero when it comes to injustice versus justice situations in society and determining her alliance in *Captain America: Civil War*. The intention of the antihero is to set apart from this view of Black Widow as an object and view the character. However, through the utilization of Director Joey Soloway's

theory of the Female Gaze Theory they dismantle the Male Gaze Theory of Black Widow by focusing on the audience's emotion through the character's actions or scenes, the narrative of the heroine, and sociopolitical achievements in dialogue in the *Black Widow* film. The conclusion of these findings were verifiable as it shows the character Black Widow as a *femme fatale* through the Male Gaze Theory. However, in the antihero trope and Female Gaze Theory, it humanizes Black Widow, and it dismantles the Male Gaze by focusing on her personality and untold storyline.

Key Words: Black Widow, Male Gaze, Marvel Cinematic Universe, *femme fatale*, Female Gaze

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Key Terms/Shortened Phrases:

Black Widow: Marvel superhero created in 1964 by Stan Lee, Don Rico, and Don Heck.

Black Widow's first appearance was in Jon Favreau's 2010 film *Iron Man 2* as Natalie

Rushman/Natasha Romanov. She originated as a Russian spy but joined S.H.I.E.L.D.

(Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division) to do good and later

the Avengers. Black Widow is one of the two Avengers heroes who does not have a

superpower, she is knowledgeable of computer hacking, acrobatics, gymnastics, and Mixed

Martial Arts combat skills. Black Widow uses electric baton sticks to fight, a handgun,

grappling hook gun, and electroshock weapon called widow's bite.

Widow's bite: Bracelets that discharge electricity

Marvel: In 1939 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created comics related to "power and

responsibility" through different cultures. Inspired by historical events such as Civil Rights

Movement and World War II.

Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU): The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a culmination of film

and television created by Marvel. This culmination comprises of currently four "phases".

femme fatale or the Fatal Woman: 1. a seductive woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations. 2. A woman who attracts men by an aura of charm and mystery.

Male Gaze: Coined by Laura Mulvey this focus views female actors as an objectified sexual image through the eyes of the heterosexual male audience, director, and actor.

Subverts: 1. To overturn or overthrow from the foundation. 2. To pervert or corrupt by an undermining of morals, allegiance, or faith.

Trope: 1a. a word or expression used in a figurative sense b. a common or overused theme or device.

Antihero: a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities.

Lens: something that facilitates and influences perception, comprehension, or evaluation.

Female Gaze: Director Joey Soloway presented the Female Gaze as a way to empower and show women in film without the objectification towards the female character. Soloway presented The Female Gaze as the heroine's point of view, the heroine's journey, and the sociopolitical discussion hidden in the work.

Red Room: A Soviet-Russian led training facility for young women, where they are kidnapped and trained to become assassins.

SHIELD: S.H.I.E.L.D. or rather known as the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division is a fictional United States government subdivision of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The Avengers: A group of superheroes such as Tony Stark/Iron Man, Bruce Banner/The Hulk, Steve Rogers/Captain America, the Norse mythological god of thunder Thor, Clint Barton/Hawkeye, and Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow.

Avengers: Age of Ultron: (Age of Ultron)

Avengers: Endgame: (Endgame)

Captain America: The Winter Soldier: (Winter Soldier)

Captain America: Civil War: (Civil War)

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The hyper-sexualization of women in superhero action films has grown increasingly, especially in *Marvel* films. This ranges from revealing clothing in Mystique's blue skin suit and nudity in the *X-Men* saga (2000-2006 and 2011-2019) (portrayed by both Rebecca Romjin and Jennifer Lawrence), 2005's standalone picture *Elektra* (portrayed by Jennifer Garner), and Sue Storm-Richards/the Invisible Woman's indirect nudity scenes in the *Fantastic Four* 2005 and 2007 films played by Jessica Alba. Critically, for decades women in superhero films have been viewed as sex symbols for the pleasure of men and have been ignored for their intelligence and fighting skills or superpowers. As of recently, the conversation of women's portrayal in big blockbuster films had changed due to the recent climate. Especially, issues such as the Times Up Movement and the #MeTooMovement have sparked how women are portrayed in film and the workspace.

The Time's Up Movement originated in 2018 as a response to sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender inequality in the workplace. This was formed by "300 women in entertainment" (*Times Up Now*) to advocate and provide resources for women. The importance of the Time's Up movement in the entertainment industry is because of the accusations against producer Harvey Weinstein being of sexual assault and harassment. Actresses (who were assaulted by Weinstein or other directors or producers) united to advocate.

In this Capstone, I will be viewing the depiction of Marvel's Black Widow (portrayed by Scarlett Johansson) who is only objectified in most Marvel films except for her standalone film, *Black Widow*. This Capstone intends to address issues such as objectifying characters for the male interest, discuss the Male Gaze coined by Laura Mulvey, and show how it is a problem for these characters. By ignoring the expertise of the leading characters, the characters are seen as

underdeveloped characters who happen to have just a pretty face. Yet, in their standalone films, these female leads are stronger, have their mindset, and are independent without their male counterparts. Through the Male Gaze, the attention on the heroines is not on what she can do, but how aesthetically appealing she is while doing the task.

This is important to study because most films are viewed through a heterosexual male lens and expectations for women and their desires and fetishes. On a side note, the lens shows how it can harm the women mentally who watch these films and see the expectations made by their heterosexual male colleagues. The relevancy of this Capstone addresses issues like the #MeToo Movement and Times Up Movement have changed for women in film and puts boundaries and guidelines to the certain Male Gaze lens point of view. Also, this addresses the distinct views of women superheroes with fewer expectations such as a certain image or seductive personalities. By removing the Male Gaze, this dismantles the perception of these leading women and humanizes their roles. This paper is not an intention to “cancel” or boycott Marvel, but to show what could be done differently. I am all for women looking and acting rebellious, but through a female director’s lens that also views them for their strength, personality, values, and a background story.

QUESTIONS PROMPTED

- While many believe the Male Gaze Theory undermines the Marvel heroine Black Widow, does this position actually help her gain autonomy and inner strength?
- Even though Black Widow’s sexuality undermines her position of the antihero, does Black Widow’s perceived sexuality allow her to be sexualized and an antihero simultaneously through the Male Gaze?

- Is there such thing as the Female Gaze, embraced through the sexual energy of the Femme Fatale and appearing as an antihero does this position fulfill autonomy for Black Widow?

THESIS

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) character Black Widow is subverted by her intelligence and skill set due to her sexuality through The Male Gaze theory and the *femme fatale* trope; however Black Widow wields her authentic powers to empower herself as an antihero trope through sociopolitical achievements in the Female Gaze Theory.

THE MALE GAZE

Laura Mulvey coined the term The Male Gaze in response to how she viewed female character objectification in film. In a YouTube video with Laura Mulvey “In Conversation With Laura Mulvey (Interview),” Mulvey states she views films not as an “absorbed spectator...but I’d become a woman spectator” (Another Gaze Journal). Mulvey noticed ideas that were sexist in Hitchcock films that she disliked through a perspective of a woman. In Mulvey’s argument, Mulvey notes the Male Gaze theory focuses on the heterosexual male director’s point of view, the heterosexual male character’s perspective, and the audience’s perspective that caters toward men. The Male Gaze is detrimental towards female actors since it typecasts them to portray the ingénue as an objectified Femme Fatale. Additionally, the female actor portrays the insignificant female superhero character in superhero films next to the female superhero character counterparts. The Male Gaze is detrimental towards the female audiences because of impossible expectations being set by the heterosexual male audience. These expectations make women feel the need to not only compare themselves to other women but feel “less than” by men. In

“Unmasking the Gaze” by Laura Mulvey in Vicki Callahan’s book *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminist Film Theory, History, and Film Studies* Mulvey argued that The Male Gaze was influenced due to Hollywood’s projection of sexuality and women as a commodity. Mulvey critiques, “the concept of the ‘male gaze’ leads away from the screen to “unmask” the way that Hollywood cinema created a lasting and visible monument to America’s invention of itself in the twentieth century, its successful colonization of modernity, and its sexualization of everyday life” (29). In correspondence to this argument, Mulvey mentioned Marilyn Monroe in 1953’s *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* as a “sex symbol” and that “Marilyn in particular represented a fusion of desires: desire for the blonde and desire for the commodities that produced her” (28). These desires invigorated films in the 1950s to produce more sex symbols in film to appeal to the Male Gaze.

FEMME FATALE TROPE

According to theorist Barbara Hales, she believes that representation of the *femme fatale* depicts women as unobtainable and sexual objects. The *femme fatale* manipulates the men she lures to danger through her sexuality by means of extortion. The *femme fatale* appears in film noir detective genre or spy movies like the 007 films. The *femme fatale* is the “Bond girl” in James Bond’s 007 films. The *femme fatales* are seductresses and display they want the male protagonist, James Bond, in every film. The *femme fatale* in the film is a female character who is a vixen who “lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelming seductive charms (preface)” (Hales 227). The *femme fatale*’s sexuality makes men want her, but she does not want them due to her conniving personality and killer nature (Hales).

Instead of settling down and catering to the men’s desires, the *femme fatale* “is the diametric opposite of the ‘good’ woman who passively accept[s] impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, [and] the control and domination of her sexuality by men” (227). The *femme fatale*

cannot be motherly and perceived sexually simultaneously. Therefore, the *femme fatale* has to choose to be either the “Madonna” or the whore. For example, if the *femme fatale* wanted to be the seductress, she has to give up motherhood. The female superhero character Black Widow represents the *femme fatale* in the MCU films because her hacking intellect and non-superpower skills are undermined by her sexuality and the Male Gaze. A few of Black Widow’s skills are her abilities to hack into computer software and break the firewalls. As well as her Mixed Martial Arts technique background, using handguns, using miniature taser targets called Widow Bites and electric batons, and the ability to toss men twice her size.

The Male Gaze and the Femme Fatale trope compel Black Widow to be recognized as unobtainable and wanted by her male Avenger cohorts such as Iron Man, Hulk, and Captain America. However, the Black Widow doesn’t want her fellow male Avengers due to her dark past of being a former assassin. As the *femme fatale*, Black Widow is sterilized and therefore has to forgo being a mother and is not given a choice to love or kill. The character Black Widow wields her sexuality as a form of agency, but it diminishes her espionage and tactical skills.

THE FEMALE GAZE

Director Joey Soloway¹ originated The Female Gaze Theory by adapting Laura Mulvey’s idea of the Male Gaze. Soloway centered The Female Gaze theory on a positive notion for women and how to view women in film. In a Toronto International Film Festival symposium, Soloway presented the Female Gaze focused in three parts: the film views women “feeling seen”, the film shows “how it feels to be seen,” and the film answers in a “sociopolitical” way (TIFF Talks). The male actor is not the main character in the Female Gaze perspective nor is the center of the attention, rather he is always something the female lead can come back to and acknowledges his

¹ Soloway uses they/them pronouns

presence. Soloway explained the Female Gaze is unlike the Male Gaze because if the Male Gaze were reversed, the film would elicit the men to be the ones objectified versus the women. The Female Gaze “reclaims the body” by making the female character the lead in the film (TIFF Talks). While most film have the male actor as their lead and features the female actor as their counterpart, the Female Gaze features the woman as the important role. The second part of The Female Gaze focuses on the director’s focus on the “heroine’s journey” (TIFF Talks). Through the utilization of the camera the female character’s story is told and the audience can “feel” and identify with the film and the female character. The last part of The Female Gaze “reclaims the heroine’ body” through a “sociopolitical” viewpoint (TIFF Talks). In the third part of the Female Gaze, issues such as autonomy, body politics, and human trafficking are brought in throughout the film to acknowledge the female character not wanting to be looked at, but issues are more important than her image.

ANTIHERO

The importance to write about the antihero trope aside from the other theories such as the Female Gaze, *femme fatale* trope, and The Male Gaze theory is to show Black Widow’s personality aside from the objectification and humanizes her like the Female Gaze. The antihero quality ultimately prevails a female character who overcomes the Male Gaze like Black Widow herself. Black Widow does this by de-establishing expectations of the Male Gaze and showing her dark personality and the origins of it. Black Widow echoes the concept of the antihero because of her dark past that haunts her from her experience in the Red Room or the innocent lives she killed as an assassin. On the contrary, this dark past is hardly mentioned due to Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow does not discuss her past with the Avengers and due to the Male Gaze Theory, she is the silent character, until her own solo film where the audience learns of Black Widow’s haunting past.

Theorist Hugh J. Ingrasci in “From Picaro to Private Eye: The Outsider’s Literary Mutations as Anti-Hero from 16th Century Rogue to 20th Century Hard-Boiled/NOIR Detective” defines the antihero as “fringe-members of society, antiheroic detectives and picaro/a/s are afforded dissenting positions on their insider-culture flaws, satiric and ironic view points generated by self-chosen or society-imposed roles as liminal citizens...often sarcastic” (136). The antihero is a character that is neither the protagonist nor the antagonist. The antihero views the world from a realistic and cynical point of view. The antihero was not born into nobility or privileged, rather the antihero’s family struggles to reap profit. For example, Ingrasci describes the antihero as someone who “has virtually no personal life or circle of friends, he rarely encounters or associates with decent people, which skews his cultural observations, so that the dark side of people’s natures dominates the insight he shares with his audience” (140). The antihero views the world as dysfunctional due to the people the antihero associates with.

In Michael Manahan’s blog “How to write the ultimate Antihero”, he explores the concepts of creating an antihero in terms of character development. A few of the important issues Manahan observes about some distinct Antihero characteristics are their “realistic flaws” (Invisible Ink Editing). For example, a few realistic flaws and morals that Antiheroes struggle with that Manahan mentions are “dishonest vs. selflessness, weakness vs. determination, and injustice vs. morality” (Invisible Ink Editing). These important characteristics and morals reflect the MCU character Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff’s ethics. The examples provided will examine scenes MCU movies that depicts Black Widow’s ethics in certain Marvel movies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Male Gaze theory analyzes the portrayal of women in film. The theory is broken down into three parts about how the female actor is viewed: the heterosexual male director, male character, and male audience. The Male Gaze Theory focuses on a different understanding of women in film. Through the focuses of a heterosexual male-centered view, the Male Gaze objectifies female actors as sexual entities. Laura Mulvey furthers the Male Gaze Theory in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narration Cinema” by noting, “role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). Due to this “to-be-looked-at-ness” connotation, Mulvey argues women are not important in cinema rather “she is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (19). To Mulvey, female characters are only there to look good and not become the heroine. In the chapter “Unmasking the Gaze” by Laura Mulvey in Vicki Callahan’s *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminist Film Theory, History, and Film Studies*, Mulvey argued that The Male Gaze was influenced by Hollywood’s projection of sexuality and women as a commodity. Mulvey critiques, “the concept of the ‘male gaze’ leads away from the screen to “unmask” the way that Hollywood cinema created a lasting and visible monument to America’s invention of itself in the twentieth century, its successful colonization of modernity, and its sexualization of everyday life” (29). Mulvey mentioned Marilyn Monroe in 1953’s *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* as a “sex symbol” and that “Marilyn in particular represented a fusion of desires: desire for the blonde and desire for the commodities that produced her” (28). These desires invigorated films in the 1950s to produce more sex

symbols in film to appeal to the Male Gaze. In Barbara Hales' article "Projecting Trauma: The Femme Fatale in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir" (2007), the femme fatale exhibits concepts of The Male Gaze and the desires of the male protagonists. The word femme fatale means fatal woman, which describes the female character's sexuality leads to destruction and professional gain. The femme fatale is a "woman who lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelming seductive charms" (Hales 227). The femme fatale utilizes her sexuality as an advantage—even to commit crimes. For example, the antagonist employs the femme fatale as the "bait" for the protagonist because she will flirt with the protagonist and the lead male character will be distracted while a crime is being committed. Hales explains, "crime is a form of sexual release for women as a sexual impulse is redirected in the act of crime" (228). Also, these crimes the femme fatale commits often are "attributed to her insatiable libido" (227). The femme fatale's sexuality is prominent in film noir detective genre or spy movies where "[the femme fatale is] the diametric opposite of the 'good' woman who passively accept[s] impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, [and] the control and domination of her sexuality by men" (227). The femme fatale cannot choose motherhood while behaving in a sexual matter because it is not her personality. Yet, the femme fatale tends to have a shorter lifespan due to her dangerous lifestyle.

Director Joey Soloway acknowledges Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory, and they outline The Female Gaze during a Toronto International Film Festival conference. The Female Gaze agenda addresses women at the forefront of a film without sexualizing them. Soloway said The Female Gaze Theory is broken into three parts: "being seen, feeling seen, and sociopolitical discussions" (TIFF Talks). The first part acknowledges the female protagonist as the main character. Such as, "a way of feeling seen" which Soloway continues by noting feeling seen

“reclaims the body” (TIFF Talks). While reclaiming the body, “the subjective camera one that attempts to get inside the protagonist (“not a cis-male”)” (TIFF Talks). The second part of *The Female Gaze* explores the emotion of the audience and character through the camera. Soloway explains the director “uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling rather than looking at the characters,” (TIFF Talks). Soloway furthers *The Female Gaze* theory discussing the director “prioritize[s] body over equipment” through the camera — such as the feeling of “melting or oozing” (TIFF Talks). By connecting to feeling *The Female Gaze* shows “how it feels to be seen” and the “heroine’s journey.” The third part of the *Female Gaze* analyzes the theme of the overall film that answers a subtle socio-political question. Soloway states the third part is the “sociopolitical justice demanding...art-making” concept (TIFF Talks). Soloway discloses into the third part of *The Female Gaze* that the subject (the female character) “returns the gaze” with “the woman as the subject” (TIFF Talks). Social justice issues of human trafficking, body politics, equality, and autonomy are examples of sociopolitical issues mentioned in the *Female Gaze*. Further, Soloway says the female character indirectly states “I don’t want to be the object any longer. I would like to be the subject and with the subjectivity, I can name you as the object” (TIFF Talks). Since the female character is the subject, the object and major topic can hold more importance than the female character’s body.

Theorist Hugh J. Ingrasci in “From Picaro to Private Eye: The Outsider’s Literary Mutations as Anti-Hero from 16th Century Rogue to 20th Century Hard-Boiled/NOIR Detective” defines the antihero as “a fringe-members of society, antiheroic detectives and picaro/a/s are afforded dissenting positions on their insider-culture flaws, satiric and ironic views points generated by self-chosen or society-imposed roles as liminal citizens...often sarcastic” (136). The antihero is a character that is neither the protagonist nor the antagonist. The antihero

views the world from a realistic and cynical point of view. The antihero was not born into nobility or privileged, rather the antihero's family struggles to reap profit. In constructing the antihero Ingrasci states, "the picaro/a/s of 16th century are preponderantly lowborn, usually bastards, and often raised by parents who survive via crime and prostitution" (136). The low-social class and oppressive living conditions causes the antihero to gain insight and survive off their instinct. Notably, the "self-preservation" skills aid the antihero to become impassive characters and nomads. Ingrasci demonstrates the antihero in literature as an "undomesticable or rootless protagonist who must confront a predatory, violent society via adopting the vile behaviors of his adversaries to survive (136). As a result of the "predatory, violent society" the antihero distrusts anyone around them. For example, Ingrasci describes the antihero as someone who "has virtually no personal life or circle of friends, he rarely encounters or associates with decent people, which skews his cultural observations, so that the dark side of people's natures dominates the insight he shares with his audience" (140). The antihero views the world as dysfunctional due to the people the antihero associates with.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Critic Emily VanDerWerff analyzes a controversial scene in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* that depicts Black Widow is not viewed as a person, but rather "reduced to her reproductive choices" (Vox). In her article, "A guide to the growing controversy over Joss Whedon's *Avengers* and Marvel's gender problem" (2015) VanDerWerff achieves this analysis of the scene by resurfacing tweets made by angered fan of Marvel and Black Widow's "monster" comment, the background of the scene, and her own interpretation. Such as, "It's the way Natasha relays this information that has caused many to question the way Ultron treats the character — and whether the film is ultimately uninterested in the emotional lives of women" (Vox).

VanDerWerff does not agree with Whedon's treatment of female heroines such as Black Widow and Whedon's television show heroines in *Firefly* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—where the female heroines end up in disturbing instances. VanDerWerff continues this segment by noting that Marvel does not focus on their female heroine storylines.

In author contributor and student, Ula Ross examines the *Femme Fatale* in her article “The Classic Film Noir *Femme Fatale*” in *The Vintage Woman Magazine*. Ross focuses on different types of *femme fatales* in iconic films such as Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon*, and Ava Gardner in *The Killers*. One of the major focuses Ula Ross mentions about the *femme fatale* is their “vamp roles” such as dark eyes and lips (*The Vintage Woman Magazine*). Ross states, “The *Femme Fatale* is known to be magnetic and irresistible, which often makes a sensational first impression, immediately grabbing the protagonists and audience's attention. She is a sexual being and uses her sexuality as a tool or a weapon to get what she wants” (*The Vintage Woman Magazine*). Ross notes, that the reason why *Femme Fatales* remain in film is because of their “strong and empowering roles” other than the “exoticism and sexual domination.”

In a *YouTube* channel *Cinema Blend* interview with Sean O'Connell, the director and cast of *Black Widow* were asked questions about the film from stunts done intentionally, favorite superhero movie, and questions toward the director Cate Shortland. A part of the interview that captures The Male Gaze Theory was asked by the director Cate Shortland and Black Widow's famous pose. Shortland adds the joke about the pose that Black Widow does “comes from an idea that in previous films perhaps Scarlett (Black Widow) has had to be more of an object. So even when she was fighting there was this idea of showing and that was what we wanted out of

this film” (Cinema Blend). This contributes to the Male Gaze Theory because instead of subverting the gaze it upholds the theory employing it as a joke.

Criminologist Erich Wulffen focused on crime psychology, sex crimes, and viewed women as inferior. According to Wulffen, he studied women that committed crimes because of their sexuality. Therefore, Wulffen said, “female criminality is forced to medical sterilization to prevent ‘degenerate progeny’” (228). Historian Barbara Hales used Wulffen’s idea to focus on the comparison of women who committed crimes at night and the *femme fatale* in film noir films. Continuously, Wulffen proposes the idea that women who are criminals are deceitful because of their libido. Hales examines this concept of the *femme fatale*’s deceitfulness by quoting from criminologist Erich Wulffen by stating, “when the instinctive vicious of women is aroused, it seems more primitive than man’s, and in a religious context, she could be regarded as evil itself” (228).

Author Virginia M Allen wrote the *Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* to discuss who is a *femme fatale*, defines who she is and what she represents in literature. Historian Barbara Hales utilizes examples of Allen’s work by defining the *femme fatale*. Virginia M Allen’s definition of the *femme fatale* is “a woman who lures men into danger, destruction...by means of her overwhelming seductive charms (preface).” Hales uses Allen’s description of the *femme fatale* to continue the idea of film noir and how they are deceitful and criminals. Hales continues to discuss Allen’s theory by stating the *femme fatale* falls under the lines of the Madonna-Whore concept that she cannot be either a mother or a *femme fatale*. Allen phrases it, “*femme fatale* is a sexual entity with the capacity to drain men’s vital powers and ‘the diametric opposite of the ‘good’ woman who passively accept[s] impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, [and] the control and domination of her sexuality by men’ (Allen 4)” (227)

Director Joey Soloway’s website Topple Productions contains events Soloway has spoken at, events in the future, and the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) that Soloway held. The webpage “The Female Gaze: TIFF: Master Class—Jill Soloway” contained the Master Class Soloway gave that explains the Female Gaze in full description. For example, “It could be thought of as a subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a Chismale/Cis-Male. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing – the characters” (Topple Productions). Soloway explains the Female Gaze in three parts—one of evoking emotion, the heroine’s journey, and sociopolitical achievements. Soloway notes the sociopolitical achievements in the Female Gaze returns the “gaze” back to the audience.

In Disney+’s *Marvel Assembled: Black Widow*, the short film highlights the behind the scenes of the 2021 *Black Widow* film. It contains interviews with the cast, behind the scenes team such as producers, costume designers, stunt choreographers, and Director Cate Shortland. A particular interview was with executive producer Victoria Alonso who adds, “the emotional layer that we added to it was necessary. It was imperative that we told you that layer from *Black Widow*. Otherwise, it would be another action film...the emotional resonance had to be something that got us through the next two hours” (*Assembled: Black Widow*). These findings add to the layer of the Female Gaze Theory. Especially, the part of the Female Gaze Theory where the camera evokes the audience’s feeling.

In screenwriter and director SC Lannom’s article for Studio Binder “The Modern Cowboy Shot — Types of Shots in Film, Explained” explores the cowboy angle shot through different explanations. Lannom continues to explain the cowboy angle as he explores the history of the cowboy angle shot, scenes that show the cowboy angle, and what that angle evokes. Such

as, the cowboy angle shot “[signals] heroism and confidence” according to website *Studio Binder* since there is a weapon at hand of the protagonist. A scene that the cowboy modern angle Lannom discusses is the Wonder Woman scene where “we get to see Diana’s power, costume, and swagger on full display” (Studio Binder).

Scenes from Jon Favreau’s 2010 film *Iron Man 2* explores theories of the Male Gaze Theory and the *femme fatale* trope. The scenes used will either be subtle indirect instances through commentary and scenes that show the cowboy angle shot through the Male Gaze Theory. For example, on page 47 there is an analysis of the donut shop rendezvous meeting between the characters Iron Man, Black Widow, and Nick Fury that explores the Male Gaze Theory due to a certain camera angle. Other examples from *Iron Man 2* include the individualized poster of Black Widow that shows the Male Gaze since the image is digitalized and enhances Black Widow’s body.

Scenes from Joss Whedon’s 2012 film *The Avengers* displays examples of the antihero trope, the Male Gaze Theory, and the *femme fatale* trope. These theories will be shown through commentary, scenes, and posters from the movie that explore a theory. For instance, on page 49 there will be a group film poster of *The Avengers* and an individualized image of Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff. The posters will explore how the Male Gaze Theory is connected to the audience due to the intention of Black Widow being hyper-sexualized due to the photo accentuates Black Widow’s body. Continuously, there will be more scenes of the antihero due to the dialogue about Black Widow’s past and self-preservation.

In Joe and Anthony Russo’s 2014 film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* exhibits the Male Gaze Theory, antihero trope, and *femme fatale* trope. These theories will be tested through scenes and movie posters that objectify Black Widow. An example of the scenes of the Male

Gaze includes a double entendre made by Captain America/Steve Rogers after he kisses Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff at a mall. For example, “Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable” (Winter Soldier). Black Widow asks Captain America if he’s “uncomfortable” after their first kiss and he replies, “That's not exactly the word I would use.” Another example includes a poster for *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, where Black Widow is objectified such as her body is accentuated digitally, her arms are open, giving a sultry look and looking as if people want her. This is in comparison to the men in the film poster who are posing for battle and normal.

In Joss Whedon’s *Avengers Age of Ultron* indicates the Male Gaze Theory, the *femme fatale* trope, and the antihero trope through scenes and dialogue. A scene that shows this is when Bruce Banner falls over the bar counter and lands on top of Black Widow’s breasts indicates the character and director exhibiting the Male Gaze. Especially when Black Widow asks Bruce Banner to not “turn green” which the dialogue sounds like a double entendre. The director, Whedon, has done this type of scene in a future non-Marvel related film and has been called on his portrayal of women. Such as a scene where Black Widow is reduced to her anatomy when she calls herself a monster because she was sterilized with the words, “You still think you're the only monster on the team?” (Age of Ultron).

In Joe and Anthony Russo’s film *Captain America: Civil War* demonstrates the *femme fatale* trope and antihero trope traits. Examples of the previous mentioned theories are depicted through dialogue and scenes. An example of the antihero quality traits is when Black Widow faces the dilemma that puts her career and life at risk. The antihero trait from Michael Manahan will employ how the antihero faces injustice and justice in terms of “justifying the means” (Manahan). Black Widow justifies the means by trading from one side who originally had good

intentions for their careers and safety to the other side who disagreed with the government controlling them.

In Joe and Anthony Russo's 2018 film *Avengers: Endgame* shows the *femme fatale* trope and antihero trope. Instances of the antihero trope is revealed through scenes that show Black Widow's redemption arc. This redemption arc scene is powerful because Black Widow is always seen as this cynical and not so verbal character, who tends to risk her lives for her team. However, we see this redeeming arc when Black Widow dies and sacrifices herself over her friend Clint Barton. This scene also will be viewed through the *femme fatale* trope because the female character puts herself at risk since the fatal woman dies at a young age.

In Cate Shortland's *Black Widow* film exhibits the Female Gaze Theory, Male Gaze Theory, and the *femme fatale* trope. The *Black Widow* film displays these through scenes, dialogue, and behind the scenes interviews with the cast and crew. For instance, I will mention key scenes that highlight Soloway's Female Gaze Theory concept of the sociopolitical commentary and the female character's narrative. The behind-the-scenes commentary that discusses the importance of emotional elements. These scenes and behind the scenes moments capture the information to ignite commentary of the Female Gaze Theory and how it can be helpful. Other examples will include, dialogue, scenes, and how a hilarious scene prevails The Male Gaze Theory because it validates the gaze since it addresses it as a problem.

Interviewer Sade Spence of *Hello Beautiful* had an interview with Scarlett Johansson called "ScarJo Talks Hyper Sexualization Of Black Widow Ahead Of Standalone Film". Spence discusses and asks Johansson about the objectification of her character Black Widow since *Iron Man 2* and how it changes in *Black Widow*. Johansson responds to Spence about *Iron Man's* comment towards Natasha Romanoff "I want one" stating "My thinking was different. My own

self-worth was probably measured against that type of comment like a lot of young women. But as you come into your own ... and you understand yourself without changing now” (Hello Beautiful). However, now Johansson mentions how it became an issue and now her character’s strength isn’t her sexuality but her vulnerability. This aligns with the Discussion post about how the female actor wants to change the narrative of their own sexualized character.

Youtuber Ariana Johnson posted a set of interviews with the actress Scarlett Johansson who plays Natasha Romanoff or Black Widow called “Scarlett Johansson shutting down sexist comments for 5 min straight” where the actress does not downplay the interviewers’ sexist questions, but she responds with a quick remark. In these interviews, the interviewers ask Johansson questions or make comments that pertain to herself or her character. Such as, Johansson’s fitness, beauty, body shape, fashion elements, and if she wore underwear. For example, when asked if she wore underwear under her catsuit since it is tight Johansson responds, “You are like the fifth person that has asked me that question. What is going on? Since when people started asking each other in interviews if they wear underwear?” Then interviewer responds, “if it was inappropriate” (Ariana Johnson). It is degrading to ask these questions towards a woman that and there was no need to ask Johansson this. These interviewers mentioned prior will be brought up in the Discussion in terms of practical use of my Capstone.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Through the application of The Male Gaze theory, this Capstone explores the objectification of Black Widow in Marvel films. The method applied to carry out this Capstone with the use of exploratory research and inductive reasoning research. Through exploratory research, I will “explore the main aspects of an under researched problem” (McCombes). There is a lack of research in analyzing superhero films since the superhero films genre is new. Examples of exploratory research I will apply consists of observations, online secondary research, and literature research. Through exploratory research I will apply observations by watching Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films, find how a scene from a movie applies to a theory, and deduce my findings. For online research, I will find interviews of the female actor, the director, film posters, websites, and more examples of the theories. The literature research I will conduct are theories from Hugo J. Ingrasci, Barbara Hales, Laura Mulvey, Gillian Rose, and Joey Soloway.

For inductive reasoning research I “develop a theory” about the objectification of MCU character, Black Widow (McCombes). By using inductive reasoning, I will gather my observations, arrive at an analysis, and prompt my theory of the various theories. By gathering my observations of each theory of the Male Gaze theory, *femme fatale* trope, antihero trope, and the Female Gaze based on films. I will arrive at analysis and explain how Black Widow is viewed per theorist’s argument and how it harms her or how the theory helps her such as the Female Gaze and antihero. By arriving at my theory, I will develop how I got to the point in my thesis.

The research data collected consists of qualitative data. Qualitative data consists of the “words and meanings” which will be adopted to the Capstone. The “words and meanings” will come from the scholarly articles, authors, and scene dialogue from certain Marvel movies. I will

interpret the scholarly research used and how it relates to the dialogue from the film. The secondary research from the film dialogue supports my evidence of the Male Gaze, the *femme fatale trope*, the Antihero trope, and The Female Gaze theory.

Gillian Rose's chapter of "Visual Methodologies" in *Research Methods for English Studies* delineates a research method for the Capstone of scenes from Marvel films. The theory from Gillian Rose's results she tested is Fran Tonkiss' Discourse Analysis I. In Tonkiss' Discourse Analysis I, Rose noticed this theory depends on "more attention to the notion of the discourse as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts" (Rose 83). In my research like Rose and Tonkiss my results are dependent on "various kinds of visual images and verbal texts" such as five films, two behind-the-scenes films, and interviews, and film posters of Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff. The second concept of Discourse Analysis I theory focuses on intertextuality or applying texts that shape a piece. Rose utilizes intertextuality to "collect a wide range of texts that are relevant in someway to the research question in hand" (83). Intertextuality is relevant in my Capstone research by applying my research to the film to understand my theory. I will connect my literature review theories to my films and dialogue in order to receive my answer.

The Male Gaze theory tested is using Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze. According to The Male Gaze theory, the female character is objectified through the view of a heterosexual male character, director, and the audience. The Capstone applies how these parts of the Male Gaze affect Black Widow through film, interviews and film posters. Through Rose's and Tonkiss' idea of intertextuality, I will consider Mulvey's examples in the Male Gaze Theory as I annotate the Marvel films. After accumulating the scenes from Black Widow through five

Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films, I will seek if the Male Gaze Theory was used and analyze how it was used.

The Male Gaze and the *femme fatale* pertain to the first part of the Capstone about the character Black Widow and how she serves the Male Gaze and the *femme fatale*. The Capstone will focus on the *femme fatale* trope to explore the idea of Black Widow wielding her sexuality to defeat evil, however she is obtainable but belongs to no one. Then, the Capstone transitions into Soloway's understanding of The Female Gaze Theory and examine Black Widow under The Female Gaze Theory through certain scenes. This Capstone will discuss the character Black Widow shown in a female director perspective versus a male director perspective. As well as the concepts of the antihero characteristics in the character Black Widow from Michael Manahan's blog about developing antiheroes and Hugh J. Ingrasci's article on the personality traits of the antihero in the primary research.

Since Director Joey Soloway's Female Gaze Theory is new, I conducted inductive reasoning to achieve my answers. The Female Gaze Theory wields Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze but centers it for empowering women, telling the woman's narrative, and captures emotions. Based on Soloway's examples and analysis of the Female Gaze Theory I formulated my own analysis based on observations, created my analysis provided by examples of The Female Gaze in the film *Black Widow* to achieve my thesis. For each section of the three parts (emotion, narrative, and sociopolitical achievements) of the Female Gaze, I noticed a cause-and-effect relationship from a "tilt in the camera" that Soloway mentions it evokes emotion. Also, I will be applying Tonkiss' Discourse Analysis I while analyzing Soloway's theory of the Female Gaze. Discourse Analysis I relies on Intertextuality and various images to achieve its results, which I will apply the TIFF Talks (Toronto International Film Festival) symposium given by Soloway to the *Black*

Widow (2021) film to obtain my results. The various images include the film, interviews, scenes, and the short documentary of Black Widow titled *Marvel Assembled: The Making of Black Widow* (2021).

While watching the movies pertained to my subject, Black Widow, I homed in on the questions I had asked in my thesis to see how Black Widow was objectified. I watched how Black Widow was viewed through the lenses of the Male Gaze Theory, Female Gaze Theory, *femme fatale trope*, and the antihero trope and answered how she was seen through these. I followed per theorists and how a certain scene shows a theory based on the director's angle, the conversation between characters, and the perception of the character. Since my research being qualitative data, I did not have any statistics showing my results I received. However, by providing the scenes, quotes per movie, and the movie posters or stills I received my answer.

Overall, these methods will explore and explain the theory of the Male Gaze in certain Marvel films. The methods emphasize under-researched film genres, develop a theory of the Male Gaze in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, and use words and meanings through scholarly articles, authors, and film scene research. The scenes employed that include the character Black Widow in films such as: *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Avengers* (2012), *Behind The scenes of Iron Man 2* (2010), *Marvel Studios Assembled: Making of Black Widow* (2021), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *The Avengers 2: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *The Avengers: Endgame* (2018), and *Black Widow* (2021).

Chapter 4: Results

The heroine in science fiction superhero films is beyond the catsuit. Beyond her aesthetic, her prude and shy demeanor at first, and the way women are portrayed in action films. She isn't a damsel in distress, no, she kicks butt and saves the world from intergalactic aliens and androids. She is on the frontlines with the strong men, capable of throwing punches, flips, and sometimes use a weapon of choice. The heroine character does not need to be seen as the pretty face and looks good next to the men, but how her strengths help the team. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) character Black Widow is viewed as sex symbol and object versus her intellect, her strength, and the ability to hack into computers. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) character Black Widow is subverted by her intelligence and skill set due to her sexuality through The Male Gaze theory and the *femme fatale* trope; however Black Widow wields her authentic powers to empower herself as an antihero trope through sociopolitical achievements in the Female Gaze Theory.

Black Widow

A common thread or trope of a Black Widow is that they are manipulative women who marry men for money and then kill him. However, this is not the case for the MCU character Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow. Natasha Romanoff has a never been married but she has exorted people before she kills them in her past as an assassin. Black Widow received her name due to her past where she was raised and trained amongst a group of girls in the Red Room where they were called black widows. Also, Black Widow received her name because she is well known as an assassin. Another trope of a Black Widow is that they are known as a vamps or women who manipulates people based on her charm, sexuality, and beauty. Natasha

Romanoff/Black Widow uses her sexuality, charm, and beauty to manipulate others for blackmail.

FEMME FATALE

The *femme fatale* or the fatal woman in English often lures the male protagonist through dangerous paths and occasionally the *femme fatale* is associated with the male antagonist. The *femme fatale* is the quintessential recipe for a spy genre film. For example, all the love interests that lure 007's James Bond into danger and get killed themselves or flee such as *From Russia with Love*'s (1963) Tatiana Romanova (Daniela Bianchi), *A View to Kill*'s (1985) May Day (Grace Jones) and *Die Another Day*'s (2002) Jinx (Halle Berry) due to their sexuality. Historian Theorist Barbara Hales in her article, "Projecting Trauma: The *Femme Fatale* in Weimar and Hollywood Film Noir" (2007), views the *femme fatale* through projections of "film noir of the 1940s and 1950s" that "features the crisis of the male identity" and "[the director's project] their anxieties onto the character of the *femme fatale*" (225). According to Hales' theory, "(Virginia Allen) defines the term as a woman who lures men into danger, destruction, and even death by means of her overwhelming seductive charms (preface)" (227). Through clips and films *Behind the Scenes of Iron Man 2* (2010), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2016), *Endgame* (2019) and *Black Widow* (2021) exemplify the *femme fatale*.

The first time the *femme fatale* notion is introduced to the audience in the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) films is in Jon Favreau's 2010 *Iron Man 2*. In the behind the scenes of *Iron Man 2* on *YouTube*, director Jon Favreau describes Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow as a "temptress, shapeshifting female character" and a "*femme fatale* assistant Pepper [Potts] (Tony Stark/Iron Man's girlfriend and Stark Industries CEO) knows something wrong with [Natasha]"

(Marvelite). Black Widow is portrayed as a *femme fatale* because of her “beautiful and deadly” style and her “espionage feel” (Marvelite). In *Iron Man 2* a scene that displays the *femme fatale* is the introduction of Natasha Romanoff or undercover Natalie Rushman. Natasha Romanoff enters Tony Stark/Iron Man’s gym room while Tony Stark is boxing with his bodyguard Happy. Natasha Romanoff goes undercover as Natalie Rushman, a notary from legal to recruit Iron Man as a part of the Avengers. Tony Stark is mesmerized by Natasha/Natalie and wants her to be his personal assistant due to Natalie’s attractiveness and sexuality. Especially, after Natasha/Natalie is asked to fight with the bodyguard Happy in the ring and she is degraded by Happy since she is a woman with the following phrase, “What, like Tae Bo? Booty Bootcamp? Crunch? Something like that?” (Iron Man 2). After Black Widow fights and successfully brings down Happy, Tony Stark states, “I want one.” This hidden identity of sorts makes Black Widow a mystery and Tony Stark only wants her because she is viewed as sexy, mysterious, and strong. In connection to the *femme fatale*, Ula Ross’ article “The Classic Film Noir *Femme Fatale*” in Vintage Woman Magazine states, “The *Femme Fatale* is known to be magnetic and irresistible, which often makes a sensational first impression, immediately grabbing the protagonists and audience’s attention. She is a sexual being and uses her sexuality as a tool or a weapon to get what she wants” (The Vintage Woman Magazine). In Black Widow’s case she uses her sexuality, her “magnetic” personality, fighting skills and photos from her lingerie modeling day in Tokyo to lure Tony Stark to have him as a part of the Avengers.

Black Widow’s introduction in Joss Whedon’s 2012 film *The Avengers*, portrays the *femme fatale* through her fighting technique and manipulating of the antagonist. First, I will describe how Black Widow’s fighting skills personifies the *femme fatale*. In *The Avengers*, Black Widow is undercover and is held hostage by Russian military guards. When Black Widow is

held hostage, she is told, “‘The famous Black Widow and she turns out to be simply another pretty face.’ To which she responds, ‘You really think I’m pretty?’” (The Avengers). After she breaks free from being tied to a chair and breaking the chair, Black Widow thwarts the enemies in a tight black dress and uses Judo techniques and other Mixed Martial Arts techniques that injure the men. In the end, Black Widow is seen picking up her heels after a massive fight. Black Widow fights men twice her size and pins all of them down at the end of the fight. This corresponds to Hales argument that, “woman’s instinctive viciousness makes her criminal acts more heinous than those of a man” (228). Therefore, Black Widow’s non-superpower abilities are especially evident in Hales theory because she is a woman and when she commits crimes is viewed as “vicious” and based on hysterics, versus a tactical way. Secondly, Black Widow answers the *femme fatale* trope by manipulating the enemy, such as the god of mischief Loki (Tom Hiddleston) from Asgard wanting to make everyone his subjects and mind control them. During an interrogation in which she is trying to find out Loki’s plan, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow feigns she has become vulnerable to Loki to the point of tears and fearing him. Suddenly, Black Widow tells the truth and tells Loki, “So, Banner that’s your play...thank you for your cooperation” (Avengers). Black Widow is always putting herself at risk especially trying to manipulate Loki. Here, this scene explores the central trope for the *femme fatale* who is manipulative to the men in a sensual way and is plagued by her criminal deeds Loki discusses such as her crimes, “the hospital fire, Dreykov’s daughter...” (Avengers) that will be mentioned in the antihero section later.

In Joe and Anthony Russo’s 2014 film Captain America: The Winter Soldier, Black Widow embodies the *femme fatale* through the chemistry with the male protagonist and her technique of subterfuge. First, Black Widow depicts the *femme fatale* through the seductive

chemistry with male protagonist, Steve Rogers/Captain America. In a hospital scene in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Steve Rogers hid an important USB drive with government intel in a vending machine, however when Steve Rogers went to retrieve the USB drive, he realizes its missing. Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow is behind Steve Rogers and waves the USB drive in a taunting flirtatious sense and pops her bubble gum that was in front of the USB drive. It was not until they let their guards down after a near fatal incident at the Hydra underground facility that they trust each other and become friends. Secondly, Black Widow epitomizes the *femme fatale* through her deceiving personality, deceitful maneuvers, and her fight technique. In a fighting scene at the World Security Council, Black Widow is in disguise as the World Security Council member Hawley. She is in disguise to extort and fight the enemy, find out his plan and take him down. The enemy is Secretary of Defense, Alexander Pierce (Robert Redford), who is working for a fascist group, Hydra, a subgroup of the Nazis. Black Widow kicks the other Council Member out of the way from being shot by Pierce then she punches Pierce, throws her shocking weapon widow bites at one security guard and slams down the other guard. Then Black Widow turns off her cloaking mask disguise veil and says to Pierce, “I’m sorry did I step on your moment?” (The Winter Soldier). Hales examines this concept of the *femme fatale*’s deceitfulness by quoting from criminologist Erich Wulffen by stating, “when the instinctive vicious of women is aroused, it seems more primitive than man’s, and in a religious context, she could be regarded as evil itself” (228). This reminded me of Black Widow because of her vicious she can be powerful and sexualized. Her strength is more powerful than the men she fought against.

The trope of the *femme fatale* is prominent in Joss Whedon’s *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2016) with the character Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the audience is

introduced to Natasha Romanoff's backstory as a young woman training to be an assassin in the Red Room, a KGB-Russian inspired training facility. As she reflects on the past, Natasha Romanoff persuades Bruce Banner to run away with her. For example, "I can't have this.... Kids. Do the math. I physically can't.' 'Neither can I. In the Red Room where I was trained... where I was raised, they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier. Even killing. You still think you're the only monster on the team?" (Age of Ultron).

Despite being known as a seductress, Black Widow longs for a family minus she can never have one after the Red Room got rid of her choice. Hales' connection to the *femme fatale* is that the "*femme fatale* is a sexual entity with the capacity to drain men's vital powers and 'the diametric opposite of the 'good' woman who passively accept[s] impregnation, motherhood, domesticity, [and] the control and domination of her sexuality by men' (Allen 4)" (227). The *femme fatale* in film and literature is viewed as an idea that she can only be a sex symbol and not a mother or viewed under the Madonna-Whore complex, whereas for Black Widow is not given a choice. This quote only reduces Black Widow to her reproductive organs as she labels herself a "monster" because she cannot have kids. This quote and scene from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* made by Black Widow was seen as controversial since according to Emily VanDerWerff of *Vox*, "It's the way Natasha relays this information that has caused many to question the way Ultron treats the character — and whether the film is ultimately uninterested in the emotional lives of women" (Vox). However, this quote reminds me of Barbara Hales' example made by criminologist Erich Wulffen that "female criminality is forced to medical sterilization to prevent 'degenerate progeny'" (228). Unfortunately, due to their pasts of crime women such as Black

Widow are not given agency in terms of motherhood. This concept will be continued and addressed in the *Black Widow* section.

Apart from the idea of choice, Black Widow personifies the femme fatale trope by luring men through danger to extort by means of her sexuality in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. While hostage in a hidden lab created by the artificial intelligence robot, Ultron, Bruce Banner/Hulk frees Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow. As they exit the jail cell, Natasha Romanoff sees there is no exit unless she unleashes the Hulk to smash their way out. Black Widow tricks Bruce Banner to run away with her so she can obtain the Hulk and defeat Ultron with the other Avengers already in battle. Black Widow's motives are revealed after she kisses Bruce Banner, she says, "I adore you" and pushes him down a hole to make Bruce Banner angry to release the Hulk and adds, "but I need the Other Guy" (Age of Ultron). Natasha Romanoff lures and kisses Banner when he is the most vulnerable to draw out the Hulk since Bruce Banner is weak and powerless without the Hulk. This scene relates to Barbara Hales' quote from Virginia Allen's definition of the femme fatale, "a woman who lures men into danger, destruction...by means of her overwhelming seductive charms (preface)" (227). Black Widow tries to pry into the emotions to get what she wants—the Avengers to assemble, even if it means directing her sexual appetite towards them.

In the Russo brothers 2019 film, *Avengers: Endgame*, Black Widow embodies the *femme fatale* through her final scene. The scene begins as Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow and Clint Barton/Hawkeye are on a trip to the space planet Vormir to retrieve the Soul Stone so they can retrieve loved ones that were gone due to the mad titan Thanos wanting to eliminate half of the population with the help of these stones called the Infinity Stones. Hawkeye and Black Widow do not realize one has to sacrifice themselves for the stone or rather, "a soul for the soul"

(Endgame). After a discussion of who would die for the stone, Black Widow sacrifices herself by letting go of Hawkeye's hand and falling to a gruesome death. Black Widow's demise is the ultimate epitome of the *femme fatale*. She leads the men such as Hawkeye to dangerous and deadly plots and dies a young and tragic death such as any of the James Bond women who die after leading Bond to a reckless path. Natasha Romanoff subverts the *femme fatale* by dying in a heroic manner. Her death will be later viewed under the antihero scope.

In Black Widow's only standalone 2021 film, *Black Widow* directed by Cate Shortland, Black Widow exhibits the *femme fatale* by defying the law. This film takes place after *Captain America: Civil War*, where the Avengers disband after arguing if they want to be controlled by the United States government. Following a disagreement, a major battle in Germany ensues which causes Black Widow to be on the run after fighting with the king of Wakanda, T'Challa or Black Panther, and breaking 117 United Nation country laws. A scene that shows the "lawlessness" and "less objective sense of justice" is when new Secretary of Defense Ross is tracking down Natasha Romanoff, but Ross ends up finding her body suit and her tracker, while Black Widow is on the run in Norway (Black Widow). Hales mentions about the *femme fatale* and immoral actions that, on the basis of "“woman's criminality by focusing on the distinctive biological changes were thought to result in psychological problems, making women less able to reason and less able to answer for her criminal deeds” (129). Hales notes due to the *femme fatale's* sexuality that it seems having an “insatiable libido” – the biological component- the *femme fatale* is unable to reason for her deeds and which Criminologist Wulffen adds, “making her deficient in observing the law and police regulations (57)” (130). Overall, Black Widow's answer to crime and injustice tends to occur according to Hales and Wulffen because of her sexuality not by her morals.

ANTIHEROES

In the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe), the character Black Widow represents the antihero in most Marvel films. The antihero is neither the protagonist nor the antagonist in films or novels. Antiheroes typically have a cynical personality because of their dark past and sees others as untrustworthy. Black Widow's sardonic personality, horrible past, and redemption arc display traits of the antihero in five Marvel films: *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *The Avengers: Endgame* (2018), and *Black Widow* (2021).

In Joss Whedon's 2012 *The Avengers*, the character Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow displays attitude of an antihero. Based on Hugh J. Ingrasci's "From Picaro to Private Eye: The Outsider's Literary Mutations as Anti-Hero from 16th Century Rogue to 20th Century Hard-Boiled/NOIR Detective" (2008), Ingrasci explores examples of the antihero and how they live their life. According to Ingrasci, antiheroes rely on "self-preservation." For instance, "as the primary, absolute law of nature for the outsider picaro/a, self-preservation's demands must be obeyed. One cannot resist criminal acts when a dire threat of starvation to death compels the individual to choose life over morality" (138-139). Antiheroes rely on self-preservation to live in dangerous situations and survival by means of killing or off the grid from their enemies. Despite self-preservation may be helpful, for others such as Black Widow her past may haunt her. An example of this past haunting Black Widow and self-preservation is a scene in *The Avengers* where she confronts the villain Loki (Tom Hiddleston) to intercept his plans to defeat him. However, these plans backfire when Loki reveals Black Widow's dark past. For instance, Black Widow says "Before I worked for SHIELD (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division) I made a name for myself, I have a very specific skill set. I made a name for myself. I didn't care who I used it for or on...I got red in my ledger. I'd like to wipe it out."

Which then Loki asks, “Can you? Can you wipe out that much red? Dreykov’s daughter, São Paolo, the hospital fire...” (The Avengers) In this scene, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow discusses her survival of her grueling past in Russia before she became a turncoat to join United States and became an agent for SHIELD. This reminds me of what Ingrasci states, “when a dire threat of starvation to death compels the individual to choose life over morality” which Black Widow picks immoral actions to outweigh her options of survival. Loki adds to the past haunting Black Widow by telling her, “You pretend to be separate to have your own code something that makes up for the horrors, but they are a part of you, and they will never go away” (The Avengers). Black Widow uses her past to deem herself vulnerable, go towards danger, and sacrifice herself for The Avengers and let her colleague Clint Barton/Hawkeye free of brainwashing.

In Joe and Anthony Russo’s 2014 film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Black Widow and Captain America team together to complete tasks for SHIELD as agents. Suddenly, Captain America finds out the secret agent CIA-equivalent has become corrupted by his old past enemy, Hydra, a faction of the Nazis. While this all occurs a blast from Captain America’s past appears— his old best friend James “Bucky” Buchanan Barnes, who has been hijacked by Hydra and turned into The Winter Soldier. While covert with Steve Rogers/Captain America at Steve Rogers’ friend Sam Wilson’s house, Black Widow shares with Steve Rogers her past. When it comes to justice for Black Widow it is muddled and blurry since Natasha Romanoff has seen both coins of good and evil due to prior being an assassin. For example, “When I first joined S.H.I.E.L.D., I thought it was going straight. But I guess I just traded in the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but I guess I can't tell the difference anymore” (Winter Soldier). Natasha Romanoff does not know who to believe since she can only trust so much

which Natasha Romanoff lacks in trust. Natasha Romanoff trusts Steve Rogers because they have been in similar situations and are betrayed by S.H.I.E.L.D. Which she asks Steve Rogers, “If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life, now, you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it?” (Winter Soldier) Instead, Black Widow’s sarcastic personality helps her hide her true emotions and cover her reasons for lack of trust. Ingrasci states that antiheroes are “fringe-members of society, antiheroic detectives and picaro/a/s are afforded dissenting positions on their insider-culture flaws, satiric and ironic views points generated by self-chosen or society-imposed roles as liminal citizens...often sarcastic” (136). In addition, the best scene that displays Black Widow’s sarcasm to cover her lack of trust is best seen in her professionalism. When the United States government intervenes and wants to imprison Black Widow, Sam Wilson, their leader Nick Fury, and Captain America Black Widow is interrogated and negotiates a reason to not imprison the three of them. For instance, “You’re not gonna put me in a prison. You’re not gonna put any of us in a prison. You know why?” “Do enlighten us.” “Because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place, and yes, we helped make it that way. But we’re also the ones best qualified to defend it. So if you want to arrest me, arrest me. You’ll know where to find me” (Winter Soldier). Therefore, this defensive side shows Black Widow as a strong person through her sarcasm and her antihero qualities of society-imposed roles of being a criminal and defending the United States.

In the Joe and Anthony Russo’s *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), an undisputed argument arises between Tony Stark/Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr) and Steve Rogers/Captain America (Chris Evans) over the government controlling The Avengers since there has been some battles in other countries that ruined the United Nations treaty with the Avengers. Iron Man believes there should be a government control over them, while Captain America disagrees and

believes they should go fight when danger arises. Thus, The Avengers consider if they should sign treaty, The Sokovia Accords, but only four sign the Accords— Iron Man, Vision, James Rhodes/War Machine, and Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow. During the conflict, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow leans towards Tony Stark’s argument. Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff states, “Maybe Tony’s right. If we have one hand on the wheel we can still steer. If we take it off...” Sam Wilson argues, “Aren’t you the same woman who told the government to kiss her a-- a few years ago?” “I’m just reading the terrain we made some very public mistakes. We need to win their trust back” (Civil War). Falcon recalls when Black Widow defended Captain America, their leader Nick Fury, himself, and Black Widow to the United States Capitol when questioning their reason to fight on US soil years prior, secrets unveiled about SHIELD, Black Widow’s ethics and her past. Yet, this concept of injustice and justice reminds me of Michael Manahan’s blog “How to write the ultimate antihero” article where he explains the antihero has to choose either injustice or mortality and societal implications. For example, “Antiheroes might appeal to our sense of justice—or rather, our distaste for great injustice. Although their goal is to commit what, out of context, might be considered an evil act, they do so to balance the scales. The ends, they believe, justify the means” (Manahan). To infer, for the antihero based on society’s values they either choose justice or injustice depending on what is at stake, however, how evil it might be they cancel it out with something else. For instance, Black Widow chose a moral side by sticking with the government controlling The Avengers, but she turns on Iron Man’s side as she shoots her electric shocking widow bites at King T’Challa/Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman) to protect Captain America and his team from getting killed. However, the reasonable move to balance her fighting the others on Captain America’s side, Black Widow renders ends up backfiring as Iron Man tells her, “T’Challa told [Secretary of State] Ross what you did, so

they're coming for you...it must be hard to shake the whole double agent thing, huh? It sticks in the DNA" (Civil War). Thus, Black Widow's motives are not trusted by her colleagues, but she sticks to what is morally correct for herself which propels her authentic character.

In Joss Whedon's *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2016), the audience is introduced to the Avengers' fears and Black Widow's backstory. One of the villains-turned hero Wanda Maximoff has the ability to absorb memories of the minds of others and manipulate their memories. Wanda manipulates and shows the Avengers, Thor, Captain America, Iron Man, and Black Widow their fears. When Wanda exposes Black Widow's fears to Natasha, we are introduced to Natasha's backstory of her days training to be an assassin in the Red Room. One of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow's fears that consumes her is she has "no place in the world" (*Age of Ultron*). Since she is a trained killer, Black Widow feels no emotions and is exposed to a world of merciless killing. In this mirage memory, Natasha trains in ballet, combat fights men twice her size, shoots a shooting range silhouette, and later advances and "graduates" due to her first kill. Interesting enough, Wanda's distortion is probably the actual truth of Natasha's backstory I could infer. Ingrasci explains the antihero backstory in "Picaro to Private Eye" as "undomesticable or rootless protagonist who must confront a predatory, violent society via adopting vile behaviors of his adversaries to survive" (136). Black Widow's previous vile behaviors she adopts are only to survive the Red Room and after some time she applies as a SHIELD agent and an Avenger. Examples of the vile behaviors are seducing her enemies, merciless killing, and she conforms to a behavior of loneliness and exile.

After losing nearly everyone in her team in the Joe and Anthony Russo's *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) film, Black Widow remained leader of the Avengers to make sure communication was clear with the other Avengers that were not "snapped" by the Titan Thanos. In culmination

of ideas, some of the Avengers created a plan to go back in time to retrieve the Infinity Stones that grant them power to bring back everyone and defeat Thanos. On their way to retrieve the “soul stone” in Vormir, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow and Clint Barton/Hawkeye find out one of them must sacrifice themselves to receive the stone. This prompts the question of who would sacrifice themselves between the two. ““For the last five years I've been trying to do one thing, get to right here. That's all it's been about. Bringing everybody back.’ ‘Oh, don't you get all decent on me now.’ ‘What, you think I want to do it? I'm trying to save your life, you idiot.’ ‘Yeah, well, I don't want you to, how's that? Natasha, you know what I've done. You know what I've become.’ ‘Well, I don't judge people on their worst mistakes.’ ‘Maybe you should.’ ‘You didn't’” (Endgame). This scene shows the parallelism of the two characters. Clint Barton/Hawkeye felt responsible and horrible after being a vigilante in Japan, therefore Clint felt it was necessary to do good by sacrificing himself to cancel the bad he had done. However, in Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow’s case due to her past of the hospital fire, the Red Room, killing Dreykov’s daughter, and her past of being an assassin Black Widow feels as if she has nothing to live for since everyone she loves are gone. Black Widow wants to sacrifice herself because she wants her ledger to be clean. Spoiler alert: after combatting, usage of Hawkeye’s archery arrow and Black Widow’s “widow bite” electric shocks Natasha Romanoff lets go of Clint Barton’s hand as they are hanging on Black Widow’s grappling hook over a cliff and sacrifices herself for the soul stone. The scene can be viewed as a redemption quality trait since Black Widow died for the Soul stone so the others “snapped” can live and clean her “gushing red” ledger. As an antihero overall, this quality and action made Black Widow an impactful character not because of her sex appeal but because of her integrity, her human qualities, gritty and cold characteristics.

Typically, antihero character backgrounds are not from noble upbringings or have a typical family upbringing. In Cate Shortland's 2021 *Black Widow* film, it shows Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow as an adolescent raised by two Red Room/Russian KGB operatives, Alexei Shostakov and Melina Vostokoff with a pseudo sister named Yelena Belova where they lived undercover in Ohio. Melina and Alexie are on the run from the United States government and leave for Cuba to continue their undercover journey. This reminds me of Ingrasci's definition of an antihero where he states, "the picaro/a/s of 16th century are preponderantly lowborn, usually bastards, and often raised by parents who survive via crime and prostitution" (136). When Natasha Romanoff was born, she assumed she was sold to the Red Room to train. When discussing with her pseudo sister, Yelena Belova, about getting in touch with their actual families and past Black Widow thought her mother abandoned her. Later, she finds out after meeting with her pseudo mother Melina to take down the Red Room that raised her that she was taken. For instance, "No, you weren't abandoned. You were selected by a program that assessed the genetic potential in infants." "I was taken?" "I believe a bargain was struck, your family paid off. Your mother, she never stopped looking for you. She was like you in that way. She was relentless." "What happened to her?" "Dreykov had her killed. Her existence threatened to uncover the Red Room. Normally, the actions of one curious civilian wouldn't warrant an execution but, as I said, she was relentless" (*Black Widow*). Natasha Romanoff exhibits a cold and gritty personality due to her personal background. Natasha Romanoff echoes Ingrasci's antihero article, where he states "[the antihero] has virtually no personal life or circle of friends, he rarely encounters or associates with decent people, which skews his cultural observations, so that the dark side of people's natures dominates the insight he shares with his audience" (140). Her cold and harsh personality derives from her pseudo-parent, Melina, who tells a young

Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow to “never let them take your heart” (Black Widow). Natasha Romanoff remains cold and never reveals her past, until Steve Rogers in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and Bruce Banner in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2016).

THE MALE GAZE

Through scenes the spectator projects the Male Gaze on the character Black Widow’s intelligence and skills are subverted due to her sexuality based on The Male Gaze Theory. In the Male Gaze Theory, Mulvey was influenced by Freud’s concepts and theories but without agreeing with his theories, Mulvey harvested a new concept based on the idea of scopophilia or the pleasure in looking and geared her theory towards a film and feminist perspective. For example, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Mulvey states, “among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer” (17). The spectators in the cinema is the heterosexual male and the performer is the woman since she is passive and does nothing in the camera but look pretty. Mulvey continues this idea of the Male Gaze theory through three perspectives— the heterosexual male director/camera, the spectator or the heterosexual male audience watching, and the heterosexual male actor. Through these three perspectives, Mulvey’s theory will be answered in scenes from *Iron Man 2* (2010), *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2016), and *Black Widow* (2021).

According to Mulvey, the audience participates in the Male Gaze by gazing at the female heroine. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Mulvey states, “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and

erotic impact so they can be said to connote-to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). The scene that displays and connotes the audience’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” is after Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow blitzes the enemy, weapons inventor Justin Hammer’s security guards she lands in a three-point “spider pose” as if looking at the audience (Iron Man 2). This scene gives this idea of a powerful woman posing in such a way she wants everyone to “gaze” at her. This scene will be satirized and discussed later in Cate Shortland’s 2021 film *Black Widow* that I will mention.

In addition to the previous mention that the male audience contributes to the Male Gaze Theory, they are influenced by what is projected on the film posters. In the international film poster of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow for the *Iron Man 2* movie, Natasha Romanoff radiates



this overly sexualized woman where her hair is messy after-sex hair and looks in the camera as if she wants someone. The image above projects the notion that this character is only a temptress and a sexual object versus the character as a whole. This digitally edited image gives emphasis to the actress Scarlett Johansson’s body and focuses on where men would most likely focus on—her breasts and hips by enhancing them. This reminds me

of Laura Mulvey’s statement of the Male Gaze Theory where, “the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (19). I will mention this later in other film posters where Johansson’s body is edited and Black Widow’s body image is the star of the film versus Black Widow’s **character as a whole**.

The third component of Mulvey’s theory of the Male Gaze is that the camera controls the gaze and how women are viewed through the Male Gaze. Mulvey states, “however, although fascination with an image through scopophilia eroticism can be the subject of the film...” (23).

In *Iron Man 2*, the heterosexual male director Jon Favreau oversees the gaze and how Black Widow is depicted. An example of this is when Iron Man/Tony Stark and S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Nick Fury (portrayed by Samuel L. Jackson) are talking to each other about Iron Man joining the Avengers Initiative and Natasha Romanoff arrives at the secured meeting area of the donut shop, but she appears at a cowboy back view low angle, where the camera focuses on the side of Tony Stark and Nick Fury at the table, and shows Black Widow's hips and backside as she enters the room. This image is depicted on the right displays the scene that shows how Black Widow is displayed under the Male Gaze Theory. The idea of this angle frame is to "signal heroism and confidence" according to website *Studio Binder* since there is a weapon at hand. Although, the only weapon we see from Black Widow is her "widow's bite" stun gun and her hips it objectifies Black Widow as the camera "gazes" at her movement entering the room. It is uncertain what the purpose of the camera angle or the director's decision.



In Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012), the utilization of the camera or the heterosexual male director projects the Male Gaze towards Black Widow. The first case is when Black Widow is introduced as Black Widow. At the train station where Black Widow is held captive from the Russian military. At the end of an intense battle between her against all the men, the low camera angle shows Black Widow's heels on the cement as she picks the heels up, the camera only focuses on Black Widow's legs moving forward. Typically, the conception of the Male Gaze is that the camera gazes upon a certain body part and accentuates it. Such as accentuating a woman walking slowly in heels or a woman's body part moving slowly since according to film these examples can be seen as appealing and sexual to men. Mulvey says emphasizing women in film

occurs because, “the presence of women is indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (21). Therefore, Whedon’s view of *The Avengers* Black Widow is less significant and viewed as a item on a window display and accentuated for her looks.

Continuously, the second component of the Male Gaze is how the audience views Black Widow. An example of depicting the Male Gaze through the audience is how the audience views the Black Widow in a hyper-sexualized images in the promotional posters. In the first image indicated below on the left, the Avengers and their leader Nick Fury are either looking to the side or straight as if it looks like they are fighting the enemy. The second image shown below on the right of the individualized poster shows Black Widow facing sideways and her body is



accentuated digitally, making an emphasis on Black Widow’s body. Both images show Black Widow in a provocative action stance in a “to-be-looked-at-ness” view versus her fellow male Avengers who are posing in a non-objectifying way. This advertisement caters to and wants men to watch not only because of the famous actors returning to a mega film and the Marvel comic superhero genre, but because of the female heroine’s unrealistic looks and objectifying stance. Overall, the over sexualizing posters puts female fans interested in these films in a tight spot of awkwardness as they look up to strong women and have to meet these unrealistic expectations.

In the Russo brother's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 2014 film, the Male Gaze is displayed through the chemistry of the heterosexual male character and the female character. According to Mulvey, the role of the heterosexual male character functions the film and he does not become the beholder of the gaze. The function of the heroine is to look pretty and become a potential love interest for the male lead. Mulvey says, "the man's role as the active and advancing the story, making things happen" (20). Throughout *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Steve Rogers/Captain America and Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow are on the run from Hydra, a faction of the Nazis, that infiltrated their CIA-like operative S.H.I.E.L.D. A subtopic of the Male Gaze theory is flirtation and innuendo conversations. While undercover at the mall hacking into computer software to find the location of Hydra, Black Widow asks Captain America to "kiss" her to create a diversion from Hydra and blend in at the mall since "Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable" (*Winter Soldier*). Black Widow asks Captain America if he's "uncomfortable" after their first kiss and he replies, "That's not exactly the word I would use" (*Winter Soldier*) that implies a double entendre of being in discomfort or aroused. Black Widow's only role suffices as a matchmaker to their co-workers, then a potential love interest, and later an agent by hacking into computer systems and combat weapons training to keep the film running.



Additionally, the Male Gaze theory connects with the audience and hyper-sexualized movie poster images. In *Captain American and the Winter Soldier* (2014), the poster shown above on the left corner, it has Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), S.H.I.E.L.D. leader Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), and Captain America (Chris Evans) in the foreground and the enemy the Winter Soldier (Sebastian Stan) and former Secretary of Defense Alexander Pierce

(Robert Redford) in the background. The male actors are seen serious and facing danger in front of them, while Black Widow's look is hyper-sexualized. Black Widow's body is digitally edited as her body is accented, head tilt back, arms are dramatically away from her, and her hair is wind swept disheveled in a dramatic Hollywood arrangement. This image only displays Black Widow only for her sex appeal and over sexualized versus the male actors.

The Male Gaze Theory is seen in the actions of the male actor towards the female. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the Avengers are combatting an artificial intelligence android, Ultron, created by Tony Stark/Iron Man and Bruce Banner/Hulk. After Ultron intercepts Stark's computer system and revolts against the Avengers, Ultron wants to kill everyone since humans are horrible after causing war and chaos. Throughout the film, Black Widow is again paired with another love interest, Bruce Banner or the Hulk. For example, Natasha Romanoff flirts with Banner by asking him to run away with her and later Natasha tries to seduce Bruce Banner to join him in the shower. By saying, "I would've joined you, but, uh, it didn't seem like the right time" (*Age of Ultron*). Black Widow is flirting and trying to seduce Bruce Banner, but he is uninterested in her because he views himself as a monster and unworthy because he cannot be a normal guy by having a family. Although, this theory that the actor gazes upon the woman, in *Age of Ultron*, the Male Gaze occurs and is projected by another male character. When Iron Man and the others are in battle, while Black Widow and Hulk are driving to the battle, Iron Man states an innuendo towards the supposed couple—Hulk and Black Widow. For example, "'Romanoff...you and Banner better not be playing hide the zucchini' 'Relax, showman. Not all of us can fly'" (*Age of Ultron*). This innuendo implies that Black Widow and Hulk are having sex by implying the Hulk is green and 'zucchini' represents phallic imagery. It is interesting to

note Black Widow is always paired or flirting with an Avenger minus Thor and Clint Barton/Hawkeye until *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) where the flirting ends.

Through actors the heterosexual male director, the Male Gaze Theory can be implied in a scene with Black Widow and Bruce Banner. During an epic battle between the artificial intelligence robot Ultron, hijacked robots belonging to Tony Stark/Iron Man and the Avengers Black Widow is behind the bar table and hides, since she does not have any superpowers like her fellow Avengers (except for Hawkeye/Clint Barton who also does not have any powers, he is an archer). As the battle occurs, Bruce Banner has not become the Hulk therefore is powerless and weak. He falls on the bar counter and slides down on top of Black Widow's breasts which she states, "don't turn green" (*Age of Ultron*). This line can be used as a double entendre because Banner turns into the Hulk, he might find landing on Natasha Romanoff's breasts arousing being in a sexual position. Director Joss Whedon repeats this scene again in another franchise movie, *DC's Justice League*, where the Flash lands on top of Wonder Woman's breasts after saving her from a collapsed bridge. As of recently, director Whedon has been under-fire for hyper sexualizing his female lead characters.

In director Cate Shortland's 2021 film *Black Widow*, background and closure occur for the character Black Widow. While on the run from the other black widows that are trying to kill Black Widow and her pseudo-sister and fellow black widow, Yelena Belova, Yelena makes fun of Natasha's posing stance she does after a fight in a sisterly way. Examples of this include, "“Why do you always do that thing?” ‘Do what?’ ‘That thing you do while you’re fighting?’ (Yelena gets into the Black Widow pose) This thing you do, you whip your hair when you’re fighting with the arm and the hair. You flip your hair and do like a fighting pose. It’s a fighting pose. You are such a poser’ ‘I’m not a poser!’ ‘Haha, ah come on they’re great poses, but it does

look like you think everyone is looking at you like all the time.’ ‘All that time that I spent posing, I was trying to actually do something good to make up for all the pain and suffering that we caused. I’m trying to be more than just a trained killer...’” (Black Widow). This scene reverts to the Male Gaze by making fun of the pose and noting Black Widow is meant to be seen as desirable. Director, Cate Shortland, notes that when Yelena made this comment, she meant to make fun of the people looking at Black Widow. For example, in an interview with *Cinema Blend* on YouTube, Shortland says, “that joke comes from an idea that in previous films perhaps Scarlett (Black Widow) has had to be more of an object. So even when she was fighting there was this idea of showing and that was what we wanted to out of this film. So, we gave this line to Florence (Yelena Belova) to point the finger to the idea that sometimes some of the stuff she’s done before perhaps was for the audience and now we wanted to say this is much more visceral and its gonna get dirty” (Cinema Blend). However, when Yelena repeats the move again by wiggling out of it, Shortland states it is an attempt to poke fun of her older sister.

FEMALE GAZE:

Director Joey Soloway²acknowledges Laura Mulvey’s The Male Gaze Theory and they outline The Female Gaze during a Toronto International Film Festival conference. The Female Gaze agenda addresses women at the forefront of a film without sexualizing them. Soloway said The Female Gaze Theory is broken into three parts: “feeling seen, being seen, and sociopolitical discussions” (TIFF Talks). The first part of The Female Gaze explores the emotion of the audience and character through the use of the camera. Soloway explains the director “uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling rather than looking at the characters,” (TIFF Talks). Soloway furthers The Female Gaze theory discussing the director “prioritize[s]

² Soloway uses they/them pronouns

body over equipment” through the camera — such as the feeling of “melting or oozing” (TIFF Talks). The second part acknowledges the female protagonist as the main character. Such as, “a way of feeling seen” which Soloway continues by noting feeling seen “reclaims the body” (TIFF Talks). By connecting to feeling The Female Gaze shows “how it feels to be seen” and the “heroine’s journey.” While reclaiming the body, “the subjective camera one that attempts to get inside the protagonist (“not a cis-male”))” (TIFF Talks). The third part of the Female Gaze Theory removes the objectified stance towards women and analyzes the theme of the overall film that answers a subtle socio-political question. Soloway states the third part is the “sociopolitical justice demanding...art-making” concept (TIFF Talks). Soloway discloses into the third part of The Female Gaze that the subject (the female character) “returns the gaze” with “the woman as the subject” (TIFF Talks). Social justice issues of human trafficking, body politics, equality, and autonomy are examples of sociopolitical issues mentioned in the Female Gaze. Further, Soloway says the female character indirectly states “I don’t want to be the object any longer. I would like to be the subject and with the subjectivity, I can name you as the object” (TIFF Talks). Since the female character is the subject, the object and major topic can hold more importance than the female character’s body.

The first part of the Female Gaze Theory answers the component of the heterosexual male director and the connection to the heterosexual male audience the Male Gaze Theory discussed. Instead of the purpose of the heterosexual male camera or male director to follow a certain object of a woman such as her heels or certain moving body parts not meant to be moved in the Male Gaze Theory, the Female Gaze Theory redirects this camera “gaze” to a new focus—the ability to connect to the audience through film. Joey Soloway discusses in the symposium:

“It could be thought of as a subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a Chismale/Cis-Male. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing – the characters” (Topple Productions/TIFF Talks).

The scenes that represent the ability for the audience to “evoke a feeling of being in feeling” are the nine multiple times Black Widow could have possibly died per situation and the audience is not sure if she is going to make it, leaving them hanging on the edge of their seat. Or when there is a fighting sibling moment between Natasha Romanoff and Yelena Belova when they first see each other. The two female characters communicate with each other by fighting and wanting to kill each other (Black Widow). In the behind-the-scenes Disney+ documentary *Marvel Studios: Assembled—Black Widow*, the executive producer of *Black Widow* Victoria Alonso mentions the importance of the employment of the camera in the film and the audience feelings by stating, “sometimes, its just with a look, or with a hand, or with the camera just tilting you just feel it and your heart just goes there, and you’re like, ‘Oh, I get it.’” (Assembled: Black Widow). Not only does the camera help the feeling and understanding of the movie but it was important to show emotion versus display another gender reversed Marvel action film—an issue Soloway has with action films reversed. Alonso adds, “the emotional layer that we added to it was necessary. It was imperative that we told you that layer from Black Widow. Otherwise, it would be another action film...the emotional resonance had to be something that got us through the next two hours” (Assembled: Black Widow).

Continuously, the second part of the Female Gaze Theory focuses on “how it feels to be seen” (TIFF Talks). While The Male Gaze focuses on the heterosexual male character and his projected sexual emotions and actions towards the female character, Soloway notes the Female

Gaze focuses on the “heroine’s journey”. Soloway adds, “I also think the Female Gaze is also using the camera to take on the very nuanced, occasionally impossible task of showing us how it feels to be THE OBJECT of the Gaze” (Topple Productions). For the film *Black Widow*, the character Black Widow or Natasha Romanoff “reclaims herself” as the subject through the Female Gaze in Marvel’s *Black Widow* (2021) versus being objectified by the heterosexual male director, actor, and audience. Director Cate Shortland answers and applies the three parts of the Female Gaze throughout the film. Black Widow or Natasha Romanoff reclaims her body as we go deep inside her dark backstory and values. To demonstrate in the trailer, “You don’t know everything about me I’ve lived a lot of lives. Before I was an Avenger...before I got this family. I made mistakes choosing what the world wants you to be and who you are” (Marvel Entertainment). Through the Female Gaze, Shortland focuses on Natasha Romanoff’s story as the main character through the narration. This narration recalls Romanoff’s past mistakes, her values, and how these values caused certain consequences that ensnare her. Therefore, *Black Widow* does not become the side character that just looks pretty and fights in her only standalone film, but rather the main character and centered around her.

The third part of the Female Gaze answers a “sociopolitical justice demanding” theme to return the Female Gaze back to the woman. Sociopolitical and justice demanding scenes are depicted in the 2021 film *Black Widow* through conversations of human trafficking, women having agency and choice with their bodies. The opening credits of *Black Widow* it displays scenes of human trafficking and women having agency. For example, the sounds of young adolescent girls screaming and crying as the henchmen send the girls away, the leader of the Red Room General Dreykov tells his henchmen to “remove all the defects”, young women being brainwashed to only assassinate, and imagery of the pigs in a slaughterhouse in the beginning of

the film (*Black Widow*). Throughout the film's opening credits there are metaphors and symbolism in the imagery such as the pigs in the slaughter depicts gathering young women and eradicate a few to become "black widows" to train to kill. This metaphor continued with scenes from Yelena Belova (portrayed by Florence Pugh), Natasha Romanoff's pseudo family member, and the enemy Dreykov. Yelena tells Natasha after they escape and have a beer, "he takes more every day, just like us when we were small. To him we are just things. Weapons with no face that he can just throw away" (*Black Widow*). Later in the film, Dreykov mentions to Natasha, "using the only natural resource that the world has too much of...girls" (*Black Widow*). Other commentaries that answer sociopolitical questions in the *Black Widow* film consist of menstrual cycles, involuntary hysterectomy depictions, discussions about choice and having agency are other sociopolitical issues highlighted. For example, during a scene of the women upset to see their alive pseudo-father Alexie, who put them in the Red Room without a choice—the character Yelena punches Alexie in the face which he poses the question, "Why the aggression? Is it your time of the month?" Instead of letting the question not phase the women, Yelena and Natasha get upset and respond back to their pseudo-father by stating: "'I don't get my period you, dipsh-t. I don't have a uterus.' 'Or ovaries' 'Yeah, that happens when the Red Room gives you an involuntary hysterectomy. They kind of just go in and they rip out all over your reproductive organs...they go right in and chop them all away, everything out so you can't have babies'" (*Black Widow*). The script was written by a male who made a joke about a woman's reproductive system but because these characters were sterilized and not given a choice³ it did not make sense to write that in. However, the actors, Florence Pugh and Scarlett Johansson, and

³ Patches, Matt. "Florence Pugh pushed for *Black Widow*'s 'involuntary hysterectomy' clapback after reading the original script." July 10, 2021. *Polygon*. <https://www.polygon.com/movies/22559604/florence-pugh-black-widow-involuntary-hysterectomy-red-room>

the director Cate Shortland created comeback that does not downplay the sexist remark. Through the Female Gaze, these discussions are not mentioned when a male director is behind the camera. In other Marvel films, these conversations weren't discussed because it was tailored to men and only Black Widow had gone through these tribulations mentioned in her solo film. Marvel has no secret of depicting political themes in their comics and films. Overall, *Black Widow*, answers the third component of the Female Gaze through powerful socio-political commentary.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) character Black Widow is subverted by her intelligence and skill set due to her sexuality through The Male Gaze theory and the *femme fatale* trope; however Black Widow wields her authentic powers to empower herself as an antihero trope through sociopolitical achievements in the Female Gaze Theory. The outcome results of the Capstone have demonstrated The Male Gaze Theory and Femme Fatale Trope are prominent themes with the character Black Widow by objectifying her and projecting this image. However, through the Antihero trope and Female Gaze Theory Black Widow prevails the objectification by showcasing her as well-rounded character. Based on these conclusions, the portrayal of strong heroine roles should not diminish their character through objectification but focus on her story. Black Widow is one of the only original six Avengers who recently had one film while three of her other male Avenger co-workers only have three films (a fourth one for Thor).

Chapter 5: Discussion

The research questions posed about my Capstone regards: While many believe the Male Gaze Theory undermines the Marvel heroine Black Widow, does this position actually help her gain autonomy and inner strength? Even though Black Widow's sexuality undermines her position of the antihero, does Black Widow's perceived sexuality allow her to be sexualized and an antihero simultaneously through the Male Gaze? Is there such thing as the Female Gaze, embraced through the sexual energy of the Femme Fatale and appearing as an antihero does this position fulfill autonomy for Black Widow? While my research problem circulates this theory of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) character Black Widow is subverted by her intelligence and skill set due to her sexuality through The Male Gaze theory and the *femme fatale* trope; however Black Widow wields her authentic powers to empower herself as an antihero trope through sociopolitical achievements in the Female Gaze Theory.

The data received from the findings support my theory that the Male Gaze Theory and *femme fatale* trope undermines Black Widow's intelligence, leadership skills, and skill set due to her sexuality. Black Widow instead for four MCU films is defined only by her charms, beauty, and sexuality that which she falls into the *femme fatale*'s trope of the vamp personality. Black Widow only uses her seductive *femme fatale* qualities only for extortion and combatting enemies. In three MCU films Black Widow upholds these mentioned theories by empowering herself as an antihero trope through self-preservation, questioning injustice versus justice, a dark past, and redeeming qualities. Although, Black Widow counters the Male Gaze theory in her standalone film, *Black Widow* through the Female Gaze Theory. By connecting to the Female Gaze Theory Black Widow's film evokes the audience's emotions, focuses on Black Widow's narrative, and elicits social justice themes. Through qualitative data, I interpreted scene dialogue

from MCU films, analyzed the scene to which theories and examples fit, and then deduced my answers.

The results of my posed questions and posed problem ended up aligning with the theories from all seven MCU films. I noticed the similarities in Historian Barbara Hales' work of the *femme fatale* trope along with Virginia Allen's definition of the *femme fatale* aligns with my theory of describing Black Widow. Whether she is undercover and trying to lure Iron Man to join the Avengers in *Iron Man 2* (2010) or put herself at risk manipulating Loki the Norse god of mischief in *The Avengers* (2012). Criminologist Erich Wulffen's theory of female criminals and their libido aligns with my notions of describing the character Black Widow or Natasha Romanoff as a *femme fatale*. Such as, "when the instinctive vicious of women is aroused, it seems more primitive than man's, and in a religious context, she could be regarded as evil itself" (228). An example of this is Black Widow using subterfuge to manipulate the enemies in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014).

As for the Antihero results, I found similarities to the antihero that align with my Capstone thesis. Michael Manahan and Hugo J. Ingrassi's description of the antihero reminds me of the depiction of Natasha Romanoff or Black Widow. Examples of self-preservation, redemption character arc, discussions of injustice versus of justice, and cynical personality traits are a few examples both theorists discuss. For example, in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) Natasha Romanoff or Black Widow is torn between her two Avengers colleagues Iron Man and Captain America's views of government control of the Avengers. Manahan states:

"Antiheroes might appeal to our sense of justice—or rather, our distaste for great injustice. Although their goal is to commit what, out of context, might be considered an

evil act, they do so to balance the scales. The ends, they believe, justify the means”
(Manahan).

For Black Widow she justifies the means by fighting against Captain America because she aligns with government control, but then balances it by turning on Iron Man and fighting Black Panther.

Film Theorists Laura Mulvey’s examples of The Male Gaze Theory supports my claims of The Male Gaze through the objectification of Black Widow. Mulvey mentioned The Male Gaze is viewed through three aspects—the heterosexual male director/camera, the heterosexual male audience, and the heterosexual male character dialogue. There were more than a few examples of The Male Gaze Theory that objectify Black Widow. The Male Gaze Theory explained the female characters are “passive” since the audience projects their wants towards them, while the male characters are “active” since they are not the ones gazed upon. Also, Mulvey notes the Male Gaze Theory focuses on the female character to project this “to-be-looked-at-ness” due to her “erotic and strong visual impact” (17). A few examples that show the “to-be-looked-at-ness” through the audience perspective of the gaze is the film posters for three MCU films: *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. These film posters project Black Widow as some character that is yearned for by heterosexual male audiences and male characters through the male directors.

Director Joey Soloway discussed the Female Gaze Theory at a seminar and discussed how important it is to recognize the female character and the emotions of the audience while projecting social justice issues. Soloway’s idea of the Female Gaze Theory supports my claim of the Female Gaze Theory through the character Black Widow in her standalone film. Soloway

recognizes Laura Mulvey's concept of the Male Gaze in their presentation but turns Mulvey's theory to a female empowering point of view. For example:

“It could be thought of as a subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a Chismale/Cis-Male. It uses the frame to share and evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than seeing – the characters” (Topple Productions)

These examples of evoking feeling and social justice issues through the female character describe the *Black Widow* film since it was not another action movie, however it told a powerful story.

The results I collected contributed to my field of research were substantial when researching for a literary criticism analysis. These results contribute to the findings of English in terms of literary criticism theory, finding theories, and consider how these theories relate to outside world our outside of literature. There is no direct answer as to what literature represents—it can be comic books, song lyrics, poetry, film since film contains words and is open to interpretation, and novels. Therefore, this Capstone represents a literary criticism of various films and types of media to answer the objectification of the superhero Black Widow from Marvel comics and films. Mulvey's theory of The Male Gaze Theory relates back to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. I learned about both in a psychoanalytical theory section in a literary criticism theory course. This prompted me to question and answer Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze Theory and other theories and tropes to answer this concept of the hyper-sexualization of the Marvel Cinematic Universe character Black Widow.

As for practical application for this Capstone it argues a change of perspective in film versus the typical perspective one watches film. This Capstone argues the objectification of the MCU

character Black Widow through the femme fatale and Male Gaze Theory, although she uses her authentic powers to uplift herself as an antihero trope and counters the Male Gaze Theory through the Female Gaze Theory. The intention of this piece was to not criticize or cancel Marvel, however, point out hyper-sexualization issues that could be done differently. By addressing such issues through the given theories, this will change outlooks on how people are objectified. Also, this Capstone shows those interested these types of film and educates them to learn how to change perspective in a good light. By educating others this perspective it enlightens others about important issues such as objectification and how the Female Gaze Theory counters the Male Gaze Theory.

As these characters' storylines evolve, the actors as well change and learn from the objectification and how they changed it. In an interview with *Hello Beautiful's* Sade Spence, Scarlett Johansson who plays Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow shares about her character's introduction in Iron Man 2. Such as, "Reflecting on her character's beginnings in the MCU, she said, "While [the movie] was really fun and had a lot of great moments... the character is like so sexualized ... talked about like she's like a piece of something and like a possession. I think Tony even says something like that" (Hello Beautiful). At first Johansson said she was "thinking different" in terms of the receiving line of Iron Man's sexist comment, but she said now, "...I feel more forgiving of myself as a woman. Sometimes, probably not enough. All of that is what is needed to move away from the kind of hyper sexualization of this character" (Hello Beautiful). Now due to issues of the Times Up Movement female actors are speaking on the objectification towards their character or themselves.

Another intention of this Capstone is to consider the harassment women have due to the objectification of these films or rather type-casted. The objectification does not just occur on the

screen but off the screen during interviews that pose sexist commentary towards the leading actresses of an action film. For example, during a press interview for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* an interviewer asked the actress Scarlett Johansson if wears undergarments under her bodysuit since it is “tight” and then she retorts back, “You’re like the fifth person that has asked me that question. What is going on? Since when did people start asking each other in interviews if they wear underwear?” The interviewer asked, “if it was inappropriate” (Ariana Johnson). Due to *Black Widow*’s promiscuity, this has led to comments of the actress “being written off as the pretty one” and told these sexist comments.

In terms of my field of English, the Jesuit value of *Magis* expresses my intention for this field for the Capstone. According to the Jesuit Values page on the Regis University website, under the “Key Values in Jesuit Higher Education” section, *Magis* means “more” in Latin and it “embodies the act of discerning the greater good in a given situation to better glorify or serve God. *Magis* does not mean to always do or give ‘more’ to the point of exhaustion. *Magis* is the value of striving for the better, striving for excellence” (Regis University). *Magis* will support my Capstone since I will discern the truth by considering and weighing in the positive and negative sides to my Capstone. Such as, if I played mediator to my argument, I would assume my argument is baseless. However, if I looked at it honestly, I would consider my argument viewed as strong and it is not baseless. By “discerning the greater good” by addressing an issue I am passionate about such as Marvel superheroes and uplifting women. My Capstone conveys *Magis* because I will be choosing a decision that will benefit everyone not just one. For example, “when choosing between two or more good options in the service of God, all else being equal, we should choose that which makes a greater impact on people” (Geger, S.J.). A greater impact

such as expressing and educating others about the issue of over sexualizing women in film. I hope to spark a change and want others to see film differently.

Next, I will address the Jesuit Value of Unity of the Heart and Mind and how this value will be incorporated into my field and Capstone. According to “Key Values in Jesuit Higher Education” Unity of the Heart and Mind addresses the importance of educating and engaging others to make a connection and share more of God’s word. Such as, “Hearts and minds are not divided, they are congruent when the whole person is educated and engaged” (Gallagher). When everyone is educated and engaged, we can have a better understanding and not cause division. I will apply Unity of the Heart and Minds by educating everyone about the hyper sexualization of women in film, Male Gaze Theory, Female Gaze Theory, Antihero, and the *Femme fatale* theory. After educating everyone I will lead them in an engaging discussion of what can be improved and what does this presentation prompt us to feel. Such as, a social impact and social justice viewpoint. In order to do Unity of the Heart and Mind and host this discussion to let others ponder, I will focus on “the interplay between one’s reason and one’s consolations and desolations (i.e., emotional experiences, but understood more subtly than that)” (Gallagher). Hence, why Unity of the Heart and Mind will support my Capstone thesis to defend the portrayal of women and film.

Additionally, I find the ethics value of transparency very important to be expressed in my Capstone. Within transparency, I will state facts, address the truth of the Male Gaze and the other theories in order to argue my Capstone. I will defend my Capstone with transparency by showing scenes to describe the accuracy of my argument.

Unity of the Heart and Mind, Transparency, and *Magis* correlate with each other which supports my Capstone argument adequately. With the notion of transparency, I can educate

others and defend the truth of my Capstone. I will educate others about my literary criticism theories and show certain scenes from films demonstrate Black Widow's lack of combat, intelligence, and hacking skills due to her sexuality. As for Magis, I will find the greater good in my argument as I discern my facts.

The principle of ethics generated for my Capstone based on my findings is justice. My top priority in this Capstone is the "duty to treat [the audience] (patients) fairly and equitably" (Jalaly, Jalal et al). My Capstone focuses on aspects of treating everyone as equals and not pitting each other or not hyper sexualizing one sex to cancel out the other sex. Through the ethical value of justice, I will advocate justice for women in film, but in a smaller scale of standing up for women in the workplace through gender inequality.

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