Iron Man as Cyborg: Between Masculinities

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Abstract

Since the turn of the millennium there has been a mass proliferation of superhero movies. From the appearance of the fist *Spider-Man* film in 2002 since the latest installment in the Ca*ptain America* series (2016), superhero movies have a tremendous popular and economic success. These popular texts have also a massive cultural impact by articulating their representations and ideologies in a global audience consisting of different national, racial, class and gender identities. The gender issues in superhero movies are often accompanied by the common observation that the great majority of superheroes are men and the rare presence of women is marked by their placement in a supporting role, thus reproducing a patriarchal ideology. Although this phenomenon can indeed be characterized as an excessive demonstration of masculine power and superheroes can be seen as mythical figures of a technological patriarchy, I would also suggest a different approach, an antithetical reading. This approach examines the overstated "technological sublime in human form" (Wasielewski 66) as a sort of divergent embodiment of subjectivity, one that contains the notion of the cyborg as described by Donna Harraway, one containing its own blurring of the ontological boundaries (161), therefore projecting its own existence as a social construction. Deploying this approach, I would examine the gender representations in the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013) not as demonstration of patriarchal power, but as masculinity in crisis, a masculinity undermined by its excessive technological look and its status as a constructed fabrication. A close analysis of the three texts and a special focus on gender representations will demonstrate how the technological subjectivity of Iron Man and the ironic performance by Robert Downey Jr. actually undermines the surface super-masculinity of the character. Finally, some general conclusion from the above analysis will be drawn.

1 Since the turn of the century there has been a mass proliferation of superhero movies. From the first installment of the *Spider-Man* franchise in 2002 to the latest *Captain America: Civil War* in 2016, there are 37 superhero movies in the top-100 records of highest grossing films worldwide for each year.[1] Their popularity is also inscribed in the all-time worldwide records, where 16 superhero films appear in the top-100 of highest grossing films. Among these, six films (*Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and the *Dark Knight Rises* (2012)) have grossed over 1 billion

[1] The number is based on a corpus I have compiled for my PhD thesis in the American science fiction film for the period 2001-2015.

dollars worldwide.[2] Given these numbers, the superhero film can be regarded as an "event movie" (Elsaesser 321), a highly sophisticated and well-promoted cinematic product that serve as a showcase window for the convergence of various industries, from the comic book and graphic novel market and the latest visual effects and audiovisual technologies, to the videogame industries and to an expanded market of other tie-in products such as toys or t-shirts. Not only is the superhero film an adequate audiovisual product in the conglomerate-driven Hollywood film industry since it can advertise and disseminate products and technologies in a variety of markets, it is also the ultimate audiovisual product condensing the aesthetics and values of the late capitalist, media saturated societies (Jameson 1-5). Hence, the superhero film displays "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all Postmodernisms…" (Jameson 8).

2 Although economic and industrial aspects are major factors in the shaping of these "spectacular narratives" (King), the boom of the superhero film is also a product of its time, ascribing various discourses surrounding the sociopolitical landscape of the first decade of the 21st century. One of the major approaches in this context is the effect of the events of 9/11 in the subsequent filmic production and especially in the superhero films, which accommodate the need of national healing in affirmative myths. The 9/11 context is stressed by Karen Randell (138) who argues that in the superhero cycle, the urban destruction has taken on what she labels as a "9/11 aesthetic" that reworks and resonates the traumatic events. Furthermore, Yann Roblou links the 9/11 trauma with the production of "complex masculinities" in superhero films stressing that we can regard these films as "answers to contemporary issues following the 9/11 trauma, one of which concerns the understanding of the multi-faceted problematic of masculinities" (1). 9/11 destabilized not only the fixed idea of a secure nation, but also the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a fundamental national myth, therefore producing "complex masculinities". Superhero films are also meaning-making systems that produce various subject positions and articulate often-conflicting discourses surrounding identity questions such as race, gender and class.

[2] All economic data drawn from boxoffice.com.

3 One of the major discourses surrounding the superhero film concerns gender issues, such as the hypermasculinity of superheroes and the patriarchal ideology underlying the texts. Sabine Lebel stresses that superhero films "are positively regressive in terms of their portrayal of male and female bodies, and gender relations" (1). Betty Kaklamanidou supports that "Patriarchy works at carefully calculated ways, and the latest cinematic superhero narratives serve once again as the proof of its hegemony despite the filmic evidence that points to a newfound respect for the powerful female heroine" (61). Adding the race factor to the superhero equation, Jeffrey Brown states: "if comic books represent an acceptable, albeit obviously extreme model of hypermasculinity, and if the black male body is already culturally ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity, then the combination of the two—a black male superhero—runs the risk of being read as an overabundance, a potentially threatening cluster of masculine signifiers" (269).

4 The hegemonic depiction of gender roles can also be located in the origins of the superhero figure in the comic strips of the late 1930's and the emergence of what is commonly known as the era of "Golden Age Comics". In these first images, the connection of the superhero figures with futurism and military technology, as well as with a eugenic hierarchy of bodies suggested a deeply authoritarian ideological core (Wasielewski 68). Although the context of the 21st century superhero has changed significantly, we can still trace the same hierarchy of bodies with the saliency of the white, muscular and hypermasculine superhero body as the ultimate protector of contemporary societies.

5 Although representations of hegemonic masculinities in contemporary production can be traced in past and present conditions, I would nevertheless like to suggest another perspective in examining these excessive masculinities. The superhero figure as a "technological sublime in human form" (Wasielewski 66) can be explored by deploying the notion of the cyborg, as described by Donna Haraway in her 1984 seminal essay. After all, the superhero bodies with their integration in a technological environment and their imminent dependence on various hi-tech gadgets can be regarded as excessive posthumans, as cyborgs with a moral cause.

6 Haraway ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 158-161) regards the notion of the cyborg as a political metaphor to overcome the dualities inscribed in the divided Cartesian

subject of contemporary societies. The hybrid body of the cyborg, part-machine, part-flesh, transgresses the polarities shaping our world. Thus, the concepts of nature and culture, public and private, male and female, animal, human and machine are reworked and reconfigured in a radical different perspective. No longer placed in the topos of "original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (159), this deviant body challenges and subvert the usual categorizations and taxonomies providing multiple, fractured identities that render the binary oppositions of hierarchical societies irrelevant. The cyborg imagery delineates a path of liberation from dualities, such as gender roles, prescribed in our bodies and our world. As Haraway argues, "the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" (ibid), meaning a world that disavows gender as "an obligatory distribution of subjects in unequal relationships, where some have property in other" (Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* 328). Thus Haraway's ironic[3] cyborg myth is "about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 161).

7 It is precisely this notion of the cyborg that I intend to explore in order to approach the issues of gender in superhero movies, and specifically in the *Iron Man* trilogy (2008, 2010, 2013). The persistence of the superhero image even in a more deconstructed, ironic version in mainstream Hollywood establishes it as an icon of contemporary culture. Thus the significance of analyzing the representations and ideologies involved around such icons cannot be overstated. Placing the superhero image in a broader context and using different methods of approach can help us reveal new meanings and ideas. The approach that I will follow diverges from the prevailing reading of superhero films that regards them as expression of patriarchal myths that reproduce images of hegemonic masculinities. The cyborg metaphor I use illuminates the meanings that are ascribed to gender as a social construction of identity in the already highly constructed superhero cyborg body. Superhero movies are after all about fractured identities, split personalities, double lives and retrofitted bodies. It is a submergence of an individual into a technological sublime that brings a transcendence of human possibilities

[3] According to Haraway, Irony is "about the tension of holding incompatible things together […] about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method" ("A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 158).

and boundaries. As Scott Bukatman suggests: "The central fascination in the superhero movie is the transforming body […] the body's discovery of its own transformation" (121). The superhero body is a cyborg body where the Cartesian ontology is rendered inadequate. Among the superhero pantheon one figure stands out as an ideal cyborg metaphor: Iron Man. Half-man, half-machine as his name eloquently suggests, he is already a divided subject, embodying a negation of the unitary subject of Enlightenment. However, Iron-Man still performs in certain instances hegemonic masculinity, but his altered body causes disruptions in the fixed sense of a gendered self. Therefore, in these momentarily disruptions lay the possibility for a critical rethinking of gender roles. As I will show, the portrayal of Iron-Man in the cinematic trilogy provides a plethora of examples and instances of altered bodies that enclose the potential of altered, multiple identities. Thus, my hypothesis is that by examining the superhero image using Haraway's cyborg metaphor, the superhero can be read as a dichotomous constructed being, enclosing opposing binaries such as masculine/feminine, thus destabilizing hegemonic notions of gender. Furthermore, notions of performance, as I will later explore, can also contribute in this perspective.

Between Masculinities

8 The first cinematic *Iron Man* (2008) is the story of the myth's origins as "the first film always features the hero's origins and subsequent films treat the emergence of each new villain's metamorphologies" (Bukatman 121). The author adds that "the origin story is the real site of plasmatic possibility […] forcing a new awareness of corporeal possibility, as the body is rethought, physically (within the diegesis) and digitally (on the level of production)" (ibid). Thus, in the first *Iron Man* film we witness a technological birth, the gradual metamorphoses of Tony Stark (Robert Downey Junior), an all-masculine all-American entrepreneur, into Iron-Man, an embodiment of fractured subjectivities. His violent birth is placed in Afghanistan, where he has gone to demonstrate Stark Industries' new superweapon "Jericho" to potential buyers. Stark's introduction to the audience finds him sitting in the back of a moving SUV, comfortably drinking his scotch, while listening to hard rock music loudly. He desperately wants to start a conversation, although the military personnel escorting him seem reluctant. When

he finally breaks the silence, they immediately start asking questions about his personal and sexual life and express their admiration. Albeit in a humorous, light-hearted way, the scene presents him as a kind of rock star and as an arrogant playboy. The initial setting is abruptly interrupted when a missile hits the jeep that precedes them. Tony manages to get out of the vehicle and the last thing he sees before falling unconscious is another incoming missile bearing the sign of his own signature "Stark Industries". In the flashback sequence that follows, the viewers get to glimpse Tony's temperament: He is an arrogant, self-centered playboy, who collects women and cars and a true believer in the necessity of weapons in keeping world peace.

9 After this introductory sequence, the scene of his violent rebirth takes place in a dark womb-like cave. Tony Stark's life is at stake as the shrapnel shards from the explosion are reaching his heart, thus he is in need of an altered body, a new birth. This is an all male birth, taking place due to masculine actions and counter-actions, where Iron Man is delivered between two opposing masculinities. On the one side, there is a surrogate doctor, Yinsen (Shaun Toub) an altruistic, scientific figure, who serves as a benevolent father figure and helps him reconstruct a new body and thus a new identity. On the other side, we have the terrorist organization "Ten Rings", an all-male aggressive militaristic group that took him into captivity and commands him to build the new superweapon "Jericho" as a condition of his release. In this all-male scenery, technology with its generative and disrupting possibilities is the only signifier that eludes a signification of masculinity. As Mary Ann Doane notes, in various science fiction narratives "the technological is insistently linked to the maternal" and technology itself is coded as feminine (185). But contrary to Doane (182) who examines "representations of technology that work to fortify – sometimes desperately – conventional understandings of the feminine", I suggest an antithetical approach; that technology can be placed in an intermediate space, between masculine and feminine and its representation may offer destabilizing possibilities in gender identities. It is exactly this destabilizing technological force that underpins Iron Man's birth.

10 Hence the birth scene takes on a double meaning: The reconstruction of Tony's identity as a result of a bodily experience is paralleled with an acknowledgment of the constructedness of his identity. The process of reconstruction, of the technological re-

birth is accompanied by deep acknowledgment as Stark is actually orchestrating his own re-birth. The "being present in my own birth" scenario is enacting a primal scene fantasy, and a rather common fantasy in a genre obsessed with origin myths, cosmogonies, world creations and destructions (Dervin 96, Penley 120). Hence, the witnessing of this primal scene elicits a traumatic acknowledgment of his fabricated identity. The two-fold process of the technological creation of the self oscillates Iron Man in different power positions. On the one hand the orchestration of his own creation gives Iron-Man an empowering position of the male creator who masters the technological skills and enhances his own body. On the other hand the recognition of this process brings forth the constructedness of his identity, the fabrication of his own masculine myth. This realization causes a traumatic awareness that the self is the effect of different experiences in lived social reality as they are inscribed in the body and thus is always in flux. Hence, Iron Man is figured as an ambiguous subject, a cyborg knowing of his own constructed 'nature'. Although the awareness of his constructed self remains embedded in a rather hegemonic masculinity, it nevertheless causes ruptures in the hegemonic notion of the gendered self as an essential, natural and permanent category.

11 The obsessive reenactments of his own construction are replayed in the rest of the "origins" film and are inscribed in his transformed social relations. After his painful birth of iron, fire and blood, he is ejected from the dark of the cave to the blinding white sand, a proper birth metaphor, where he is rescued and brought back home by a literal Deus Ex-Machina, an American army helicopter. The following sequences record the trajectory of the newborn's first clumsy steps into the kinesis of a full-grown subject who has mastered his movements and choreographies. The gradual submersion into the potentialities of his new iron self, the obsessive tests and rehearsals of his powers, bring him to a personality meltdown, a dissolution of the stable identity and a fixation in the constructedness of the self. The metamorphosis is also inscribed in his social relations as they are depicted in the course of the film. From the accompaniment of numerous women prior to his transformation, his current sociability is located in the highly technological environment of his basement where his main interactions are with Jarvis, the male voice of his central operating system and his anthropomorphized (and funny) fire extinguisher. Finally, his relation with his assistant Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) is rebalanced,

although not yet in full equality, by acknowledging her importance in his life.

12 Although the cyborg status is causing dissolution of the boundaries that shape Tony Stark/Iron Man, I am not suggesting a complete transformation but rather an ambiguous placement in various subject positions. His gradual trajectory from a cynical arms manufacturer supporting a militaristic ideology into a more sensitive and considerate individual is not without gaps or contradictions. His identity is not completely altered but shuttered in an incongruous way. After all, this is what the cyborg entails: the coexistence of the opposites, the destabilization of the Manichean logic[4]. Hence, Iron Man may still express arrogance, superiority, or hegemonic masculinity but these instances are not an expression of his solid identity and are in constant conflict with other elements of his fragmented identity.

13 After Iron-Man achieves a complete mastery of his augmented body, his new existence is established in an Oedipal-like confrontation with the father figure of Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), a close friend of his father and co-director of Stark Industries, who obstructs his entrance in the (symbolic) world. Obadiah represents a dominant masculine authority that opposes the 'soft' turn in Tony's positioning (as he ironically asks him "What, you are humanitarian now?"). Iron Man denies the authoritative masculinity of the father-figure, having acquired a new identity that is diverging from the law of the Father[5]. Thus, his own masculinity is figured as deviant. Nevertheless, in the final scene of the duel and in order to confront Iron Man, Obadiah acquires his own giant iron suit, therefore looking like a dark reflection of Iron Man, a meaner, larger, darker version of the self, which is a common feature in superhero films (Tyree 28). Still, although they are similar on the surface, the two augmented bodies have different experiences, different embodied subjectivities and thus different stories to tell.

14 Iron Man and Obadiah embody and project different masculinities. Iron Man is a cyborg; an organism with embodied technological modifications, while Obadiah's nature remains unchanged within his huge, powerful Iron Suit. The difference is a matter of embodiment and is the defining point of their actions. Iron Man's status as a cyborg

[4] Manichean logic refers to a worldview that describes everything in dualistic opposite terms such as good vs. evil, dark vs. light etc.

[5] Put in simple worlds, the "Law of the Father" in Lacanian psychoanalysis represents the body of social laws, conventions, norms and values of a given society. The adherence to the Law facilitates the child to abandon its desire for the Mother and to assume its 'proper' gendered role.

signifies his embodied difference, a result of a lived experience that has been inscribed into his body. Starting from Stark's ironic injury due to his own weapons to the slow realization that the military industry is actually a threat for the innocents, his inner transformation follows the outer change. Another important incident is his acquaintance with the benevolent father figure of Yinsen, who literally replaces Tony's heart and offers him an alternative model of being. Therefore, Tony's altered body is a production of his own history that marks him with an open wound, a trauma reminding him of the fragility of existence, transforming him both externally and internally. On the contrary, Obadiah's transformation in the final duel is only superficial, external. His transformation is just an Iron Suit that he wears skin-deep and prevents him from any inner changes. Thus, the boundaries of his identity remain unchanged. The suit is just a 'hard' projection of his ego that excludes any lived social experience; it is just a weapon that reflects his solid, unchanged and 'closed' identity.

15 In the second part of the trilogy, *Iron Man 2* (2010) Iron Man's masculinity is again replayed in contrast with other masculinities; those of his enemies but also of his ally, Colonel Rhodes (Don Cheadle). Again Stark's trajectory is delineated between two poles of masculine authority. On the one hand an extravagant excessive masculinity embodied in Russian Ivan (Mickey Rourke) who is marked as a deviant and ethnically Other body. Ivan's masculinity is expressed as an old fashioned masculinity powered by the will to avenge his own father's betrayal by Iron Man's father, Howard Stark. Ivan's body, excessively muscular and covered with tattoos, inscribes not only a negatively deviant masculinity linked primarily to prison life, but also the cold war politics of America. Besides the foreign enemy, there is also the enemy from within, personified in Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell), as the egomaniac entrepreneur who puts profit and fame above everything, including his country's safety. He sees the perfect opportunity in Ivan's ability to build his own army of iron suits, but his masculinity is being ridiculed as Ivan just uses his resources to meet his own purposes. As it is common in the genre both characters are constructed as hyperboles, portraying an image of excessive masculinities coded in a negative way. Justin's and Ivan's masculinities are inscribed as destructive and negative, serving their own egoistic purposes and failing to contribute to the community.

16 On the other hand, but equally reproducing hegemonic masculinity, is the

protective, law-abiding Colonel Rhodes. Being a close friend of Iron Man and a high-ranking officer in American Air Force, he represents a masculinity that aims toward the protection of the community, engulfing ideals and values such as friendship and honor. When Rhodes witnesses Iron Man in an out-of-control state he decides to stop him and claims one of the iron suits as his own. Although at first he puts his faith in the American Army and hands over the Iron Man's suit to the authorities, the army's collaboration with Justin Hammer and the subsequent catastrophe makes him skeptical about official authority. Thus, he stands as an intermediate figure between Iron Man and the army, between private initiative and national control[6].

17 Iron Man stands between opposing male forces, between mainstream and divergent masculinities and blurs the boundaries between private and collective, egoism and altruism, between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic modes of masculinity. His masculinity is an intermediate and ironically opposes all stable categories. The oscillation is inscribed in his trajectory in the filmic narrative. In one of the first scenes of the film we see him in a Supreme Court hearing, where he is asked to deliver the Iron Suit into the hands of the government due to its status a weapon. Iron Man objects this statement and he refers to the suit as "high-tech" prosthesis and adds, "Iron Man is me. You can't have me". At the end of his triumphant and arrogant speech, he concludes: "I privatized world peace". These statements are inscribing a tendency of mistrust in the government and its handling of military issues – perhaps a comment in the post 9/11 foreign policy. Although in the end of the film his stance is recognized as right – only he can efficiently handle the suit – the need of collectivization, if not nationalization, of security issues is vaguely recognized with the first helpful appearance of the S.H.I.E.L.D. initiative. While he initially declines the job offer as a S.H.I.E.L.D. advisor (he is disqualified for a full membership due to his narcissistic tendencies) with the line "you can't afford me", he does seem to put some consideration into this idea (proven in the subsequent film of the Marvel cinematic universe, *The Avengers* in 2012). Hence, he is placed in a liminal space between collective action and private initiative. However, Tony's choice to oppose the state-control of his powers can be regarded as a part of his hegemonic masculinity,

[6] Colonel Rhodes' character will be further complicated after his accident in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and his potential assimilation in a cyborg status due to the technological prosthesis that enables him to walk.

simply reproducing the state politics on a private level. Nevertheless, his consideration on using his powers in an alternative collective force and his liminal positioning disrupts hegemonic discourse by suggesting alternative and intermediate possibilities.

18 In the third and final part, the metamorphosis is complete. In this part Stark is presented as vulnerable, sensitive and grounded. He is devoted to two things: His iron suits, which function as a sort of surrogate children, or as Tony puts it "a part of me", and his relationship with Pepper, the most important aspect in his life. These two 'loves' seem to be in conflict at times as the suits are uncannily assuming different domestic roles that undermine his relationship with Pepper, or even worse, threaten her life. However, these instances can also be interpreted as a Freudian return of the repressed, since Tony's repressed hypermasculinity is reflected in the suits' seemingly growing sentience. Another characteristic that delineates his vulnerability and subverts any notion of dominant masculinity is the panic attacks that Tony experiences. Showing a superhero experiencing panic attacks is a total reversal of the common notion of hegemonic masculinity, which usually excludes any signs of 'weaknesses'. Tony's body inscribes the coexistence of the opposite, the elimination of the dualities of a hegemonic masculinity, such as weak and strong, powerful and powerless, superhero and everyday man. Finally, his sensitive and caring side is revealed in his relationship with the child who helps him after he lands unconscious in Tennessee, having escaped in one of his iron suits from the catastrophic attack in his house. Although never resorting to overt sentimentality and preserving his cool, ironic persona, Iron Man seems to take a real interest in this child by giving him a solution on how to deal with bullies and by empathizing with him as he projects his own childhood also marked by an absent father. Yet, this incident can be read as Stark fulfilling the criteria of a heteronormative father and re-writing his own traumatic father-son relationship, yet it also reveals qualities usually coded as feminine that add another dimension in his not-too-solid masculine identity.

19 His transformation is paralleled with the trajectory of Pepper Potts's arc in the film. As Pepper is captured by Aldrich Cillian (Guy Pearce) – a personification of the evil scientific-industrial complex – who uses a biogenetic process to turn dismembered ex-soldiers into weapons, she is subjected by force into this transforming process and thus

acquires a more than human status. In the final battle scene, as she comes out of the flames after a sixty-meter fall and saves Iron Man, she is finally positioned as his equal. Her transformed femininity is matched with Iron Man's altered masculinity. In this scene, the issues of gender roles reallocation and of a latent empowered femininity throughout the trilogy are openly manifested. It is the necessary reversal in gender roles for Iron Man to complete his transformation and re-enter his social milieu as a changed man.

20 In the final scene of *Iron Man* 3 (2013), both Iron Man and Pepper get rid of their prosthesis and thus return to a 'normal' human status. Nevertheless, they remain changed because the inner transformation has altered permanently their fixed, stable sense of self[7]. As Iron Man says in the end, "my armor was a cocoon… and now I am a changed man… I am Iron Man". It is exactly this identity description that can be attributed to the process of becoming a cyborg. The armor is indeed a cocoon for the reworking and negotiation of a traditional understanding of the self as a closed and fixed identity with impermeable limits. The armor, the 'external self', the technological prosthesis subvert this image, thus disrupting any notion of traditional, fixed categories such as masculine/feminine. However, I am not suggesting that Iron-Man is a "creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" 159). On the contrary, he still remains a gendered figure. Yet the awareness of his constructed identity and the possibility to change it brings also a disruption in the sense of a gendered self as a solid, fixed and permanent category. The gendered self is just one possibility in a rather fractured identity. It is this acknowledgment that cannot be removed along with the technological modification. Once disrupted, the notion of the self cannot be brought back to neatly, fixed boundaries and thus the importance of the conclusive and sort of existentialist identity manifestation: "I am Iron Man".

Performing Self, Performing Cyborg

21 One of the highly discussed aspects of the Iron Man trilogy was Robert Downey Jr.'s performance. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert ("*Iron Man*") writes:

> Downey's performance is intriguing, and unexpected […] Tony Stark is created

[7] Pepper Potts's transformation seems to be confined in the *Iron Man* trilogy, since she is downgraded to a marginal and slightly more passive role in the *Avengers* (2012) and disappears from subsequent Marvel films.

> from the persona Downey has fashioned through many movies: irreverent, quirky, self-deprecating, wise-cracking [….] "Iron Man" doesn't seem to know how seriously most superhero movies take themselves. If there is wit in the dialog, the superhero is often supposed to be unaware of it. If there is broad humor, it usually belongs to the villain. What happens in "Iron Man," however, is that sometimes we wonder how seriously even Stark takes it. He's flippant in the face of disaster, casual on the brink of ruin […] At the end of the day it's Robert Downey Jr. who powers the lift-off separating this from most other superhero movies. You hire an actor for his strengths, and Downey would not be strong as a one-dimensional mighty-man. He is strong because he is smart, quick and funny, and because we sense his public persona masks deep private wounds.

Other critics have also commented upon the link between Downey's performance and his public persona. A.O. Scott comments: "On paper the character is completely preposterous, but since Tony is played by Robert Downey Jr., he's almost immediately as authentic and familiar — as much fun, as much trouble — as your ex-boyfriend or your old college roommate". Kirk Honeycott states "Downey plays off his own bad-boy image wonderfully" and David Edelstein complements: "Who wouldn't root for Downey as a guy who has to clean up his act? [...] Downey has such terrific instincts." Lastly David Denby remarks: "He [Downey] can make offhandedness mesmerizing, even soulful; he passes through the key moments in this cloddish story as if he were ad-libbing his inner life."

22 The comments on Downey's performance and its connection with the actor's persona highlight issues of performance as a dual focus on the embodiment of character and the body of the actor. This correlation is described by Richard de Cordova, who defines performance, in contradiction with acting, as the moments of the body's activity where the split between actor and character is foregrounded or as he puts it, "those moments in films in which acting comes to the fore and is noticed, there is a split between actor and character as agents of two different actions" (152). This rupture between the two bodies creates a distancing effect and "when the performative dimension comes to the fore […] the body of the actor becomes an issue in the film, and, at those moments, the spectator is involved in a particularly complex play of identification and belief" (de Cordova 155). It is precisely this rupture that is achieved by Downey's ironic performance. The funny, quick and casual style and the projection of Downey's own 'bad boy' persona create a distancing effect and the 'seriousness' of the character with all its

gendered attributes are constantly interrogated by the text. This doubling effect is further enhanced when one considers that several lines of Iron Man's dialogue were actually Downey's improvisation (Eisenberg, "Jeff Bridges says Iron Man was all Improv") resulting in a further projection of the actor's persona within the fabricated character and an accentuation of the disjuncture between the real and fictive body. Thus, a space of self-reflexivity, humor and discontinuity is created that undermines the credibility of Iron-Man as well as his superficial masculine characteristics that at first seem to define the character. Although at first look these masculine characteristics seem to be simply reproduced, Downey Jr. uses humor and ironic distance to oscillate and adapt between different types of masculinity. Thus, a critical distance is created for negotiating the meaning of these hegemonic masculine features.

23 The dichotomy between the character and the actor's body is further complicated when another split is considered; that between the physical body and the technological body as inscribed in the figuration of the cyborg. Christine Cornea (4) comments on what she calls a "cyborg performance" and stresses the interconnectedness between the cyborg, technology, cinematic apparatus and generic context and those issues of performance are entangled with what is considered a "proper" or "natural" style of acting. Specifically, Cornea highlights how the "robotic" performance of many cinematic cyborgs (i.e. in *Terminator* films (1984, 1991), *Robocop* (1987), and *Universal Soldier* (1992)) can be considered as a "generic form of acting" that is common to science fiction film and thus must be interpreted in a proper context and examined in relation with other elements of the cinematic text. In the case at hand, Downey Jr.'s cyborg performance is rather anti-robotic, albeit equally superficial. It is a performance that does not try to reveal a deeper meaning for the character or transfuse him with psychological depth[8] but instead it remains on the surface. Thus it can be understood as a self-referential performance that by avoiding the search of a "depth" and of a "reality effect" stresses its own constuctedness. As Cornea notes the type of performance that stresses materiality and depthlessness can be marked by what Philip Auslander characterizes as "resistant forms of performance that retain a degree of self-reflexivity, remain at the level of the

[8] Iron Man's character is reworked in a more complex manner in subsequent films (*Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron (*2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).

superficial, the surface, while somehow avoiding a reification of the very surfaces they present" (10). By presenting a self-referential, ironic superhero like Iron-Man, and by playing out loud the common (or latent) aspects of masculinity, as coded in previous cinematic superhero texts, the films under examination provide a "resistant form of performance". Portraying Iron-Man's oscillation between different types of masculinity, the films create multiple layers of referentiality where Downey's performance undermines and parodies superheroes' traditional masculine traits.

24 Several instances in this 'constructed' performance, one that brings attention to its constructed surfaces, can be found throughout the trilogy. For example, in *Iron Man* (2008), we find extended scenes where Tony Stark builds his technological suit, while trying to master the powers and possibilities it offers. Tony delivers his first efforts of a new reconstructed body with humor, while depictions of an all-controlling masculine power are constantly undermined by his failures. Thus, Iron Man is a literally constructed hero shown as the product of constant self-production, of trial and failure. This constructedness is highlighted by his playfulness, as he makes his interaction with his suit seem like a delightful activity than a serious preoccupation. For instance, his fist trial of the suit is actually a child-like ride in the night skyline of Los Angeles, which echoes the thrilling experience of human flight as a common children's dream. Another example is during a fighting sequence in *Iron Man 3* where an adversary asks him: "Is that all you've got? One trick and one cheesy line?" to which he ironically responds: "Sweetheart, that could be the name of my autobiography." Thus, he performs his own 'low' superhero status in contrast with the serious, grand masculine characteristics of other superheroes. By remaining on the surface, and by acknowledging it, he paradoxically avoids the reification of these surface qualities. The text reveals the superhero as a constructed gendered self, a self that according to Judith Butler continually performs its gender by a ritualized repetition of stylized acts. Hence, Downey delivers a performance that draws attentions to its constructed elements by intertwining parts of comic dialogue with an appropriately ironic enunciation, thus laying bare the mechanism of a constructed, gendered superhero image.

Conclusion

25 As we are now approaching the end of the 2010s, the superhero craze seems to expand, entering a more self-referential, ironic phase. Although instances of humor and irony are evident in older examples of the genre, such as *X-Men* (2000) or even *Superman* (1978), nevertheless this tendency is more evident and self-reflexive in recent superhero texts. The superbly preposterous *Deadpool* (2015) became the first superhero film with a Golden Globe nomination in the category of best musical or comedy, following the same path of self-referentiality, parody and humor that deconstruct and parodies the dominant superhero image. This self-referentiality ironically plays with the main genre conventions and offers a fresh perspective in a saturated genre. Besides the generic renewal that seems to be at work, issues of representation and ideology, such as gender roles are also brought into question.

26 By associating the superhero image with another prolific contemporary image, that of the cyborg and by deploying other tools of analysis, such as performance aspects, I hopefully showed that new meanings can be disclosed such as the disruptive possibilities of the technological, constructed body. Hence, notions of hegemonic gender representations that shape the analysis of superhero image are questioned and even in occasions subverted and replaced by notions of the constructed self and the subsequent blurring of its boundaries and dichotomies. Nevertheless, hegemonic gender depictions are far but absent in superhero films; but they are often placed in a liminal space between hegemonic and counter masculinity. Thus, the *Iron Man* cinematic trilogy offers a plethora of subject positioning and "points of entry", creating a heterogeneous and conflicting textuality that offers a multitude of readings. Whether this is a Hollywood strategy in order to renew a genre and to address a larger audience, that often contains radically different subjects, or is the result of conflicting social discourses and movements, the superhero myth has still some revealing stories to tell about the boundaries of ourselves and the multitude of identities that we adopt in our contemporary world. Hence, Iron Man's description in a cyborg metaphor can offer us a new perspective in exploring gender issues in the enduring superhero myth.

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