Original Article

Masked Thinkers? Politics and Ideology in the Contemporary Superhero Film

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Abstract: This article analyzes the ideological representations in the discourse of contemporary superhero films. In recent years, there has been a tendency in the genre: The characters have become more self-conscious of their roles, even questioning the 'greater good' that they are trying to achieve. Thus, the ideological representations of two recent superhero films are studied. For the corpus of analysis, *Iron Man* (2008) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) would be selected to be examined based on a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, and using two categories: plot and characters (the second with two subcategories: biographic origin and objectives). The main results point out political contradictions at the discursive level and suggest a relation with current political issues of the contemporary capitalism. This work discusses how a text unfolds an ideology harbored in the meanings and values of an American-based production and political culture.

Keywords: Ideology, Discourse, Political Representations, Superheroes, Film, Politics.

Introduction

It is unquestionable that the American cinema has a great influence globally; every year, a multitude of U.S-produced films land in the movie theaters across the continents (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Webster, 2014). '*Blockbuster*' has become a term to coin Hollywood's super-productions (Elberse, 2013); with large budgets and 'mega-stars', these products are likely to be consumed by considerable portions of audiences. For instance, a single movie such as *The Avengers* (2012) achieved a box office of $ 1, 511, 409, 272 worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2012).

The superhero films have gained popularity in recent years. Their stories have proven to be profitable for Hollywood studios, as well as alluring for global viewers. The Marvel franchise has been the leader of this production increment. Initially, the media company sold the rights of certain characters to major studios; the studios, meanwhile, developed their own versions. Nevertheless, Marvel executives, led by producer Kevin Feige, decided that it was better, creatively and economically, to start producing the films by themselves,

independently, sometimes with an occasional partnership (Leonard, 2014). This decision created the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, which consists of separate stories of different superheroes that are linked to a common narrative (Murray, Phipps, & Singer, 2013), having the opportunity to unite all the characters in feature films such as The Avengers series or *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Following the box office successes of its competitor, D.C. Comics has also started to plan a similar shared universe in cinematic form. Thus, the phenomenon suggests a trend of a *new superhero film*, in which a base narrative nurtures different plots with tight relations between each one.

Discursively, the superhero genre has been criticized for containing ideological representations that support a certain *status quo* (Arnaudo, 2013; Collins, 2015; Eco, 1964/2011, Klock, 2002; McAllister, Sewell & Gordon, 2001; Moore, 2003; Hugues, 2006). Nonetheless, Marvel comics have historically integrated references to social reality, creating more intertextual conflicts (Johnson, 2012; Rauscher, 2010). This tendency has appeared in the cinematic counterpart: The characters have become more self-conscious of their roles, even questioning the 'greater good' that they are trying to achieve. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has started following a more traditional logic, but the recent stories have focused on moral issues, criticizing, for instance, military solutions typical of American foreign policy.
Hence, this article studies the political representations of two recent Marvel films to understand the ideological operations of their cinematic discourse. Two films were selected to understand the relationship between political ideologies and contemporary iterations of the superhero genre: *Iron Man* (2008) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). The study is based on a Critical Discourse Analysis approach and utilizes two analytical categories: plot and characters – the second is divided in two subcategories: biographic origins and objectives.

For this, the concept of *ideologeme* is discussed as the single unit of an ideology; the analysis proposes that the discourse of the films' functions based on two: society and individual. This relation points out a contradiction regarding the ideals searched by the superheroes whilst, at the same time, gives the semiotic mechanism to harmonize oppositional meanings. The discursive process is considered as a mirror of current political issues and concerns a product of recent historical developments such as the economic crisis of 2008.

Theoretical Considerations

Popular culture is a realm where many meanings and values collide; nevertheless, there are dominant forms and contents that prevail anchored in hegemonic dynamics, generating a defined discursive repertoire across different media outlets (Morley, 1992; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). Media products are created within an ideology that enables the production process in a technical or a semiotic sense, displaying it either in a clear or in a more ambiguous manner. In this sense, Jameson (1981) suggests that a *political unconscious* operates underneath narrative manifestations, locating the product in a specific socio-historic context of emission, setting the possible paths of interpretation, and charging it with ideological maneuvers or objectives.

The figure of the superhero has become a cornerstone of the mainstream media culture in recent years, even though its influence and popularity began in the era of comic books (Coogan, 2006; Johnson, 2012; Reynolds, 1994). Different studies (McAllister, Sewell & Gordon, 2001; Moore, 2003; Hugues, 2006) have found that the character of the superhero unfolds a clear ideology, defending in several occasions a hegemonic *status quo*. For instance, distinct superheroes have displayed intertextual connections with their socio-historic

conjunctures; for instance, Captain America initially faced challenges proper for World War II, the period in which the character was created (Dittmer, 2011, 2013).

Žižek (1994, p. 1), following the ideas of Ernesto Laclau, argues that ideology functions as a generative matrix that regulates the relationship between the visible and the non-visible, between the imaginable and the non-imaginable; thus, the political representations found in media products are a crucial variable in the construction of the social world, they are frameworks that function as references of possible readings for a certain audience. The inscription of an ideology in a product occurs based on the possibilities offered by a particular political conjuncture; in other words, reality, understood as a dialectic between the material and the symbolic, is the ground from where ideology emanates. For Ryan and Kellner (1988), the relationship between film and social life is developed in a process of discursive transcoding, pointing out a dynamic of semiotic tensions:

> Films transcode the discourses (forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social life (pp. 12-13).

The transcodification of discourses exhibits how political representations are rooted in media products. But a representation, as theoretical category, not only indicates the trace of some political value, it helps to strengthen that which it stood for originally; in this case, films recreate features of a certain ideology and they support its reproduction at the same time. Popular culture, then, boils different political realities, being a sign and defender of a particular Zeitgeist.

Inside a media product, the 'footprints' of an ideology can be grasped. These basic unities are called *ideologemes*, being described by Kristeva (1974) as an intertextual function that confers historic and social coordinates. Jameson (1981, p.76) suggests that an ideologeme is an amphibian formation that has a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation simultaneously. This concept indicates the main cores of an ideological representation, the meeting point between politics and narrative. Nonetheless, it needs a further re-elaboration to be identified more clearly in the superhero films here analyzed. For this, the role of rhetorical figures in ideological representations, as theorized by Ryan and Kernell (1988), becomes extremely useful. For the authors, metaphors allow the sedimentation of allegories, symbolisms, and myths, whilst metonymies link a representation to a material basis of social reality; these two spheres can be in harmony, or in conflict, depending of the political state of affairs. Thus, the structure of an ideologeme shall be recognized as follows:

Figure 1: Structure of the Ideologeme
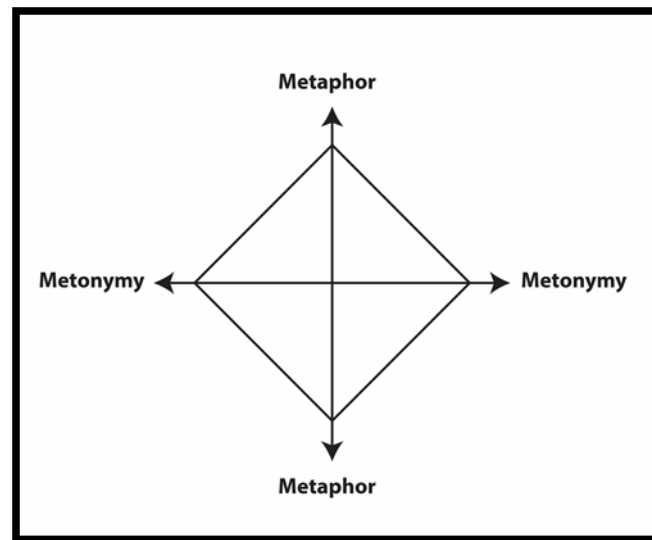
This 'open-diamond structure' illustrates the tensions, agreements, and antagonisms that could be present in an ideologeme as the primordial unit of a textual ideological operation, as the engine that powers semiosis. According to Ryan and Kernell (1988), the metaphor displays a vertical relation headed to an idealism or allegory, it assembles an abstract ground; e.g. all the values attached to the American notion of 'freedom'. On the other hand, metonymy addresses a material, or 'real', situation, almost as an index in a Peircean fashion, it is the reference to the everyday life for a subject, to the vicissitudes of social life; e.g. the economic conditions and constraints that a character must confront.

This proposed structure is called 'open' because: 1) it points out the levels of abstraction of the metaphor and material constrictiveness of the metonymy. The ascendant-descendent direction of the metaphor line signalizes the level of abstraction that the rhetorical figure has in a product. The horizontal direction of the metonymy line indicates an almost endless possibility of direct and concrete relationships with a context. 2) It is in an intertextual relation with other ideologemes in the same product that contains it, and with the social world in general; 3) ideologies change and disappear, hence ideologemes must be conceptualized as veering entities.

A single ideologeme can show contradictions: a struggle between metaphors and metonymies. And this situation can be present in a media content. As part of a cultural production process, films can display oppositional meanings. These strains are common, and are found in hegemony in general. Superhero films are not the exception: They can express realities that challenge ideals hitherto dominant.

Research design

This qualitative study is based on a discursive and ideological analysis of cinema. The main concerns are centered on the texts themselves, scrutinizing the political representations present in the discourses that display an ideological representation. The adopted approach is anchored on a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. As Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2011, p.357) suggests, this theoretical and methodological standpoint is interdisciplinary and aims to examine specific problems, being concerned with the semiotic dimensions of power

and the political and economic change in culture and society. In this sense, media products are containers of discursive constructions that are part of an ideological dynamic, their content can be dissected to understand how the operation interacts with social life (van Dijk, 2001).

According to Torfing (2005), one of the main advantages of the approach is that it is open to new methods and conceptual formulations. Therefore, the political representations of superhero films will be dissected to identify the ideologemes from the ideological operation they nourish. The corpus of analysis consists in two Marvel Studios productions: *Iron Man* (2008) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). This selection seeks to include the first independent production of the franchise and another one from the so-called second phase of its cinematic universe to fulfill a sharp and detailed inquiry.

Table 1: Corpus of analysis

Film	Release date	Director	Screenwriters
Iron Man	30 April, 2008 (United States)	Jon Favreau	Mark Fergus, Hawk Ostby, Art Marcum & Matt Holloway
Captain America: The Winter Soldier	13 March, 2014 (United States)	Anthony & Joe Russo	Christopher Markus & Stephen McFeely

The analysis in question is carried out based on two main categories, attending the definitions and considerations provided by Chatman (1978): first, *plot*, meaning the complete progress of events and actions in a delimited narrative universe; with this study unit, it is intended to identify the main ideological representations of the films and the possible similarities and differences among the two texts. Second, *characters*, indicating the fictional agents that are the protagonists of the storyline; this study unit will be divided into two subcategories: *biographic origin*, trying to understand the background and principles that drive the character's behavior, and *objectives*, establishing the direct goals of these actors within the story. For this category, only the main superhero and the villain are taken into account to illustrate the political representations through an oppositional relation rooted in a moral conflict. The study was made using an analysis matrix to classify the results obtained, taken as base the procedure offered by Barnett (2005).

In an initial phase, the discursive analysis distinguishes the distinct ideological representations contained in the films. Then, these findings are discussed based on the proposed 'open-diamond' structure of the ideologeme.

The Superpowers of Representation: Discourse and Ideology

In this section, the ideological representations of the filmic discourses are discussed to identify the main ideologemes of the products. The principal findings are divided into the categories and subcategories described above.

Plot

The narrative construction of the two films follows the basic conceptions of screenwriting according to a Hollywood tradition (Field, 1984/2005; McKee, 1997). The flow of actions and events is displayed following the dramatic progression of the objectives set by the protagonist. In this case, the superheroes have to confront a threat uttered by an aggressor or villain (Vogler, 2007). This construction is based on a moral problem: The agent that carries the main action seeks an ideal; thus, its main operation is an antagonism between two conflictive perspectives. The focus is posed under the dramatic agent that is considered the messenger of 'noble intentions', being the possible point of identification for the audience. Hence, this narrative conception suggests that the superhero is the defender of a repertoire of desirable meanings and values. Ideology appears in this semiotic gap: the signifiers are available for the attachment of a specific stream of signifieds, of political beliefs (Laclau, 2005).

In *Iron Man* (2008), Tony Stark is a billionaire, heir of a weaponry empire. His corporation is trying to sell to the United States Military a missile called 'the Jericho', which could benefit the American cause in the Iraq War. But an Arab terrorist group called 'the Ten Rings' kidnaps Stark so he can build the device for them. The mogul, being also an intellectual genius, cheats the organization to believe that he will build the missile; instead, he creates an iron suit that allows him to escape. Stark returns and announces, in a press conference, that the weapon manufacturing division of his corporation will be shut down; nonetheless, he faces the opposition of Obadiah Stane, one of the enterprises' executives and former CEO, who is interested in economic efficiency. Tony Stark creates a better iron suit, but, at the same time, the terrorists that kept him captive discover the remains of the initial armor and start to assemble it again. Stark discovers that his company is selling arms and technology to the terrorist group, and that Stane is backstabbing him, trying to keep him away from the board of directors. Following his evil plan, Obadiah Stane visits the terrorist group, paralyzes their leader and steals the remains of the first iron suit: his plan is to reproduce the prototype in order to sell it. In a final battle, Stark fights Stane, both dressing an 'iron jacket', and the protagonist beats his rival.

The filmic discourse is located historically, in the American invasion of Iraq, adopting the American cause as the background for the dramatic events. The military is shown as reactionary: instead of being the cause of the war – after all, the conflict was started by the political motivations held by president George W. Bush –, the army defends itself from the attacks of radical organizations. The war is not problematized: Everything occurs in a given state of affairs and several actions along the storyline are depicted as necessary for protecting the nation. The American hegemony is not questioned; and notwithstanding the change of attitude of Tony Stark after he is hold hostage, the imperialistic ideal is explicit at the beginning of the film when the character remembers one of his father's phrases: "Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy". This discursive elaboration is based on a sense of ambiguity that may suggest a mild critique towards the armed intervention or a supportive sentiment towards the war.

'The other guy' represents the sphere of antagonism of the filmic discourse. The source of evil, then, comes from the outside: The villains are foreigners whose extremist objectives attempt against the *Pax Americana*. This narrative configuration is paradigmatic considering that it poses the otherness as direct enemy: An Islamic terrorist group becomes a threat for the superhero and for the national security. Thus, the danger is external, undermining the domestic welfare. As Sandoval-García (2004) argues, these discursive constructions fortify the edification of nationalism, setting it as an ideal, by degrading other identities as strange and different. The narrative is American-based: It becomes a plead for a

certain set of values that position the United States as the center, and socio-economic engine, of the world. Jameson (1992) defines this characteristic as the *geopolitical unconscious* of a product, the territorial imaginary it suggests; by contemplating a specific space as the stage of actions, a discourse can support a hegemony. This dynamic is crucial in blockbusters due to their global reach (Elberse, 2013; Webster, 2014); as media products, they are semiotic ambassadors of ideological stipulations.

Nevertheless, one of the main villains in *Iron Man* (2008) is national inside the narrative universe: Obadiah Stane is an American citizen. This situation leads to the most remarkable critique made in the film: the excesses of the economic system. Even though, the discourse is guided through a military fantasia that reinforces U.S. dominancy, the plot shows how greed can affect minorities and vulnerable populations (Alford, 2010). The villain is only concerned with profit growth and economic efficiency; in order to increase the capital of Stark Industries, he starts dealing with extremist groups, without any regards for the consequences. Indeed, the film's ideological representations are based on dichotomous moral categories, but it also raises ethical preoccupations about the distribution of armament in this kind of conflicts and the motivations of the organizations that are acquiring it.

At the end, the solution is simplistic: Tony Stark is trying to make a better world, thus he deserves the iron suit. However, the proposed argument is important. The role of technology is highlighted; discursively, it is connoted that progress shall be discussed according to its uses and intentions. The film exhibits the ethical implications of artillery usage by the United States in armed conflicts. *Iron Man* (2008) illustrates a tendency that has become a convention in the contemporary iterations of the genre: The presence of denounces based on current political issues. The cinematographic discourse exposes the effects of contemporary capitalism in a moral fashion, addressing a crisis of values. Although it forgets to exhibit the causes more directly, the film indeed tries to achieve some critical relevance in an ambiguous way.

Captain America: the Winter Soldier (2014) is the sequel of the first Avenger's story; it tells how Steve Rogers is living in modern society after being frozen since World War II. In the film, the Captain discovers that a federal agency, SHIELD, (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division) is developing a project called 'Insight', which aims to build a defense mechanism – constituted by several flying ships full of guns – that will kill potential dangerous individuals in advance, before committing a crime. Rogers opposes the initiative because, for him, it is an assault against freedom. But, suddenly, Nick Fury, director of SHIELD, is attacked and dies. Hence, the Captain and Black Widow, a female secret agent, start investigating the murder, realizing that HYDRA, a former Nazi organization, controls SHIELD thanks to Alexander Pierce, Secretary of the World Security Council, who intends to use the defense mechanism to rule the world. Captain America decides to face the menace; but, at the same time, he is in constant danger thanks to the apparition of the Winter Soldier, a mysterious and deadly figure, who in reality is Bucky Barnes, Roger's best friend during WWII. Then, Nick Fury reappears, confessing that he faked his death. Thus, Rogers develops a plan to destroy Project 'Insight' and to dismantle all the operation of SHIELD. After a fierce battle, the superhero fulfills his objective and the agency is eradicated.

One of the most important political representations of the film regards the villains. The deployed narrative model uses antagonism as a mechanism for signalizing moral categories. In this sense, the traditional conceptions prevail: The enemies are outsiders, foreigners. It is truly symptomatic that, first, HYDRA is a German organization, remembering all the efforts carried out by the United States against Nazism; and, second, the Winter Soldier is dressed with Soviet signs, such as a red star in his metallic arm, being a direct reference to the Cold War. Therefore, the 'evil forces' are allegories to historic

adversaries of the American power. The Otherness is seen, again, as a threat to national interests; ideology needs a distinction to operate, it creates opponents, attackers, in order to render its own hegemony and ontology (Torfing, 2005; van Dijk, 2008).

Despite this anchorage in traditional ideological and discursive representations, the film centers his main argument in a polemic issue: security and surveillance. The whole struggle effectuated by Captain America seeks to stop the implementation of a violent technology used as an excuse for peace. 'Freedom', an important value of the American ethos, is put to test, its meaning is questioned. An ethical discussion arises: the real implications of sacrificing free will in order to get order. In the cinematic text, the superhero observes it clearly: "you are holding a gun against everyone on Earth and calling it protection". This critique can be related to modern-day events such as the 'Arab Spring', WikiLeaks, and the digital control wielded by authoritarian regimes (Christensen, 2012, 2014; Fuchs, 2013). Hence, the discourse maintains a dialogue with contemporary political developments, exposing it within the plot: What could be an abstract or complicated event in the news is depicted through the grammar of the blockbuster's visual spectacle.

Captain America: the Winter Soldier (2014) highlights the power and entangled relations within institutions and organizations. The antagonistic force of the film succeeds in establishing its agenda by controlling the structures and decisions that comes from governmental bureaucracies. The discourse identifies that a political outcome might result from the movements that take place inside an organization. In a provocative *à la* Foucault (1977, 2000) style, the narrative displays how power functions as a network of networks in institutional entities; true domination comes from the edifications of bodies of knowledge that contain self-legitimizing practices. A special attention is directed toward the invisible scenarios of everyday life; Steve Rogers signalizes that it is important to ask who is making the decisions, and for what.

This film in particular suggests a meta-narrative dimension (Waugh, 1984). The superhero unfolds an awareness about his role, questioning former methods of action and goals. The figures of authority are scrutinized, the final mission is reconsidered to grasp its principal essence; in the plot, Captain America tries to secure real freedom to civil society. This aspect is an important rupture with the cinematographic history of the character: The soldier does not follow orders anymore. The self-consciousness enables a critique of power structures, a partial departure from *status quo*, and from the figure of the superhero itself.

Characters

Tony Stark is the man behind the suit of Iron Man. His origins are traced in a prominent family belonging to a patriotic American tradition; for instance, Howard Stark, his father, was a scientist that created military advances for the U.S in the World War II. Since his childhood, the young heir of an industrial empire was considered a genius. These intellectual abilities have been used to improve the company's main activity: military technology. A rich-family background is not rare in the superhero genre (Coogan, 2006); this narrative construction suggests a top-down flow of benefits: a member of the millionaire class brings the 'grace' to the inferior levels, an ideal common to right-wing conservative sectors. The 1% appears to hold the hope for the rest 99%: the actions of Iron Man are presented as charity toward an 'inferior and uncivilized world'. This fact is pivotal to all the story: Without his resources, Tony Stark could not be Iron Man; only a technocrat would be able to develop such an alter ego. In the film, all the empathic characters are associated with a high social class, and the villains with lower ones –in this case, the terrorist group-.

Stark's progression along the plot is important because it stands as a critique for a decadent economical system. At the beginning, the billionaire is egotistic and self-absorbed, appearing to be only interested in living an elite life. Nonetheless, after his kidnapping, he changes, realizing the danger of an 'armed peace'. The corporate culture of Stark Industries is only concerned with revenues; to sell, the identity and intentions of the buyer are ignored. Tony Stark aims to tackle the problem. Ironically, his solution is building an iron armor: freedom and reconciliation seem to necessitate a police body to guard them. This way of thinking opens a moral breach: Technology can be prosperous when it is use correctly; but what does it mean 'correctly'? Who shall be the person in charge of deciding its usage?

Steve Rogers is the man who wears the mask of Captain America. After taking a special serum, Rogers became a super soldier to fight the Nazi menace during World War II. Accidently, he was frozen until the U.S. government discovered him almost 70 years later. In the film, the Captain questions institutional authority, being an important change in the cinematographic narrative of this superhero. What could have been a two-dimensional character becomes a thinker in his own terms: he is depicted more as a detective than as a soldier. This is the base of his internal conflict: Captain America now shows a patriotism based on critical inquiry. Discursively, the representation is crucial, signalizing the abuses of structural control, and considering the ideals of the superhero as an end in itself that can collide with traditional forms of authority.

But all the doubts regarding authority figures are framed in a moral naïveté. Steve Rogers still searches for a greater good without defining it. Even though, there is an important shift in the representation of dominant organizations, the values pursued are inherently 'American': The Captain is fighting for the 'empire', trying to defeat its internal enemies. The film discourse does not promote tolerance or an ecology of knowledge, its core is ethnocentric. Rogers indeed saves the United States; however, this is elaborated in a particular rhetoric strategy: saving America means the World, a hegemony is expanded and validated globally, as ruling principle, in a clear discursive synecdoche.

The villains of a superhero film are usually related to him or her in some manner; they share incredible powers, the difference dwells in their goals (Arnaudo, 2014; Coogan, 2006). In *Iron Man* (2008), Obadiah Stane is an industrialist businessman as Tony Stark, he embraces the whole capitalist criteria, being obsessed with economic growth and profit. The attitude leads him to make deals with dangerous organizations. With his persona, the excesses of the actual socio-economic system are addressed: a massively consuming greed and egoism rides the operation of Stark Industries. Again, with moralistic narrative devices, the film poses as a threat to the inhumanity that derives from a disproportionate corporatism. The danger is spotted in the outburst of unregulated practices. Evidently, the film does not plead for the destruction or redistribution of the means of production, it solicits a more moderate and human model.

Stane's objectives are simple: to generate money. In this sense, the film presents a refreshing vision compared to similar cinematic superhero stories: the villain is not interested in 'destroying the world', or another analogous *cliché*, it aims to achieve economic progress. This behavior is the basis for the whole aggression that Iron Man will have to face. Two political antagonisms, inscribed in the same ideological spectrum, clashes in the form of technological warriors.

Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) is more aligned to a classic narrative of the genre. The two main villains are members of HYDRA, the Nazi organization that was the original opponent of Captain America in the past. Its operations are carried out through SHIELD, an American agency of security. Evil, then, is transmitted as a disease from the outside; the national welfare is contaminated by a threatening other that responds to a historically driven representation. Despite the provocative critiques uttered by the film, this

construction of corruption as a contagion from an external source undermines the discussion, it makes it soft; the solution proposed is to defeat the persons that allowed the invasion. The focus is located on the 'symptoms' and not on the 'illness' itself. The motivation is the control of the planet; in this sense, there is not a political confrontation regarding the ideology supported by HYDRA, a complex political thought is reduced to a plan performed by 'thugs'. The ideological representations described in this section are contradictory: The superheroes criticize the abuses of capitalism or power structures, but, at the same time, they defend moral values embedded in a tradition of American hegemony. These kinds of critiques present in blockbusters are an important effort to transmit a political awareness towards large portions of audiences. The inception of the discursive contradiction can be found in the semiotic operation of the ideologemes that operate in the discourses. This discursive operation is addressed in the next section.

The Ideologemes of the Masked Thinkers

As exposed in the past section, the discourse of the analyzed films tends to be contradictory at some points. The political representations contain direct critiques to some aspects of the contemporary capitalist system, but, at the same time, they promote the ideals of the American power, the principal supporter of the denounced system. This fact can be related to what Bell (1978) calls *cultural crisis*. For the author, capitalism is under constant crisis because it demands different ontologies that may differ between each other; e.g. consumers are almost obliged to enjoy the act of purchasing goods in a 'liberating' manner while they are required to display attitudes of discipline and obedience when they assume the role of 'worker' or 'subordinate'.

The ideological movements of each film, indeed, confirm a crisis of coherence. All this operation occurs in the ideologemes, as basic units of an ideology. Discursively, the main conflicts of the two superheroes point out two principal foundations that work as a 'flipping coin', staging arguments that are in fact, contradictory. As Žižek (2006) proposes, this 'optic' phenomenon is a parallax that permits the existence of oppositional realities as if they were logical. It depends on the perspective: one side covers the other when it is in action.

Therefore, following the theoretical elaboration fulfilled in preceding sections, the 'open-diamond' structure will be used to explore the agency of the ideologemes of the films. It is considered that two ideologemes operate as principal pivotal points for both texts.

Ideologeme: Society

This ideologeme draws aspirations of social order, of the best system to organize society. In *Iron Man* (2008), the metaphoric level is located around the image of peace; even though the armed occupation in Iraq is problematized in an ambiguous way, the superhero seeks to achieve reconciliation through the employment of technology. Moreover, in some moments, the war is explained as a vehicle for a peaceful result. The metaphor operates in contrast with its metonymic sphere: The film succeeds in showing the disasters of military intervention; a certain *pathos* drives Tony Stark to change his mind about weapons. The material constraints question the idealized conception of 'peace': Paradoxically, this status can only be achieved though violence, annulling its real meaning. The solution proposed by Stark of an iron amour exemplifies the contrast, the allegory is divided from its cause. In a Laclauian fashion, the signifier is separated from its original signified and it has to function as if it were complete, forgetting the semiotic/conceptual and, consequently, factual connection.

In the case of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), the metaphoric relation is entangled around the same ideal of 'peace'; nonetheless, it is confronted with the concept of social order and structure. Again, the allegory is confronted with a metonymic stance: The discourse asks for the meaning of the searched solutions. The material consequences of accomplishing a peaceful society are brutal, vicious. Ideologically, symbolism and materiality are detached: one cancels the other, but with this operation the contrary direction is signalized.

Ideologeme: The Individual

The figure of the superhero stands as a quest for a better subject as a moral category. This can be proved in the narrative journey that the character confronts, a progression whose final outcome is the hero as a more evolved individual. In this case, the superheroes desire to achieve freedom for themselves and for society. In *Iron Man* (2008), Obadiah Stane endorses a free market ideology: Corporations, as subjects, shall not be regulated, according to his thought. But, this idealization does not take into account the metonymy of inequality. He owns means of production that enable him to plan his actions; on the other hand, those who are excluded from the privilege cannot do anything but suffer the effects of the weapon business. For the villain, the market is the epitome of freedom, disregarding its ethical consequences, considering it an entitlement that can be bought. Capitalism promotes this value as keystone, yet most of the time the ways to achieve it are contradictory. Tony Stark, however, supports an ideal without excesses. In this sense, the film's discourse does not elaborate on the definition of the superhero, it takes it for granted.

'Freedom' is the central point of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). The metaphoric and metonymic levels of the film's ideologeme are aligned. The ideal is discursively constructed as something in danger, something that must be constantly revisited; in this sense, there is a considerable shift compared to other blockbusters. The metaphor is not blind; it is linked to the material realities of its symbolism. The metonymy sphere of the ideologeme suggests a paradox of protection: This value can be the excuse for authoritarian regimes. Steve Rogers says it clearly: "This isn't freedom, this is fear." The individual is at the center of the question; the antagonism of the story renders two possible results: democracy or totalitarianism. Indeed, the film is more metonymic than metaphoric, being the principal quality of the text.

The ideologemes, then, present a metaphoric ideal, allegory, that highlights a symbolic repertoire harbored in ideology. The metonymic sphere, on the contrary, unfolds the limits of the metaphor in a material reality. This tension is present along the analyzed films. Both ideologemes are in constant interaction within the narrative, they touch similar topics, reinforcing their operation; as the basis of the ideological representations of the discourse, they are inscribed culturally, illustrating a dynamic moored to the social world.

The birth of ideologemes inside a discourse can be tied to a discursive transcodification process in which social meanings are translated to fictional narratives (Ryan & Kernell, 1988). But fiction implies the construction of alternative realities that, in one way or another, still have elements of their 'primordial broth'. The contradictions found in the ideologemes signalizes how ideology is not logical, it allows a sensitivity that can ignore – or unite – oppositions, digressions. As Eagleton (1997) suggests, "in the sphere of ideology, the universal truth and the concrete particular truth incessantly slide along each other, dodging the mediation of rational analysis" (p. 42). Ideological struggle points to the edification of hegemony. Notwithstanding the fact that the scrutinized films utter political critiques, they do not contemplate alternatives, different epistemologies; they pledge for the correction of the abuses of a socio-economic

system, not for a real change. The discourse attempts to 'clean' the hegemony while standing inside of it.

Concluding Remarks

This article analyzed the political representations of superhero films, evidencing a contradiction of meanings. The study of the two main ideologemes of the cinematic discourse points out a tension between an allegorical and a material level, suggesting that ideologies tend to rest in symbolisms rather than facts. For this, an apparatus of cultural production is crucial to transmit contents that create the grounds for a certain ideology; as Ryan and Kernell (1988) sharply observe, culture is the antechamber of politics. Cinema can function as a semiotic therapy.

The characters, and the ideologemes, exhibit a discrepancy between morality and ethics. Žižek (1992) traces the line for this two terms that are commonly taken as equals. Even though they share a very close relationship, for the author, morality means the subscription to an authority of any type, considering it superior in some sense, to get knowledge about 'good' and 'evil', or 'right' and 'wrong'; for instance, the Bible as a ruling principle. On the other hand, ethics signifies questioning the *telos* of something by using reason and logic, commonly based on standards set by a scientific discipline. Thus, the metaphoric level tends to be moralistic, while the metonymic level is inclined to be ethical. The superheroes confront alleged ideals with their thinking: e.g. Captain America trashes his loyalties to an institution to fulfill a more ethical goal. This conflict becomes the center of the dramatic actions, refreshing a tradition of mainstream codes of narrative production.

Contemporary blockbusters exhibit a tendency of addressing relevant political issues within an explosive narrative. The denounces can be a first impression for audiences, they can raise awareness towards discussions that somewhere else could be really difficult. But all the criticism is constructed, at the far end, in a simplistic form. These productions shall be transcended for a more detailed argument. The cinematographic discourse tries to tackle some 'deficiencies' of the 'machine', it does not try to propose a radical shift, or a revolution. For Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), opposition is essential for capitalism, validating its position as a dominant reality; the authors suggest that resistance is part of the *spirit of capitalism*, the mode in which a society is engaged within the ideology. Insurgency reflects hegemony, and can be used as a tool to promote it.

Furthermore, the films are commodities of the Hollywood industry; they take part in a global system of entertainment. Jameson (1979) signalizes that Capitalism cultivates a reification process in which human activities are instrumentalized according to the dominant ideology and the modes of production (p.130). In general, the discourses found in different media outlets are part of this process; in one way or another, they promote a minimum aspect of the ideology. Fisher (2009) denominates this situation *capitalist realism*, the acceptance of this socio-economical structure as a reality, as an inescapable form of life. It has become difficult to escape its influence.

The superhero genre shows the intricate dynamic of values and meanings, an ideological project confirms its impact when popular culture starts using its main ideals. Nonetheless, the analyzed films display a crisis, a contradiction that can be interpreted as a mirror of the current political context. The socio-economic system is experiencing a significant moment of distress; from the trenches of social media to manifestations on public streets, many sectors are advocating for consciousness, for more human models (Fenton, 2011).

The popularity of the superhero must be explored. The stories show supernatural human beings defeating problems that threaten the planet. Perhaps it has become easier to imagine that a special agent will save the world than to imagine real political action achieving it (Žižek, 1994).

As Eco (1978/2005) notices, these characters tend to fight social problems properly from the reality in which they are produced; its narrative deployment tries to placate worries and concerns shared with the audience.

The theoretical input of the present article discusses how texts unfold an ideology harbored in the meanings and values of a hegemonic production culture. To expand the study of ideology, it is necessary to promote empirical research of the field. For Williams (1977), hegemony is a dynamic process in which values, beliefs and ideas are interiorized, as the everyday life itself, in dynamics of limits and pressures. In this sense, the audiences, according to their backgrounds, can read these contents in many ways (Hall, 1980).

Superheroes, in their cinematic forms, may be critical of social reality; perhaps the biggest achievement that they could aspire to is the assurance of more democratic media systems, the exposure of different epistemologies to gain an ecology of knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2011). Undeniably, the power of thought turns ordinary men and woman into superheroes; that is why true political action does not need radioactive explosions.

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