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Master's Thesis

Avenging the Anthropocene

Green philosophy of heroes and villains in the motion picture tetralogy The Avengers and its applicability in the Swedish EFL-classroom

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Abstract

This essay investigates the ecological values present in antagonists and protagonists in the narrative revolving the Avengers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The analysis concludes that biocentric ideals primarily are embodied by the main antagonist of the film series, whereas the protagonists mainly represent anthropocentric perspectives. Since there is a continuum between these two ideals some variations were found within the characters themselves, but philosophical conflicts related to the environment were also found within the group of the Avengers. Excerpts from the films of the study can thus be used to discuss and highlight complex ecological issues within the EFL-classroom.

Keywords

Thanks

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1 Introduction

One's initial and personal definition of the word 'text' may perhaps be restricted to written fictive or non-fictive texts such as novels or the daily newspaper, although the definition may also incorporate multimodal expressions of culture. With this broad definition in mind; pick one fictive text which has made an imperative impact on how you perceive or interact the world around you. One may reckon that everyone has such a novel, film or poem even if one is not consciously aware of the existence of such a bond between fiction and individual ideals. Under these circumstances, any text, regardless of its nature, origin or initial purpose, has a potential influence on how one as an individual perceives the world around oneself.

The potential influence on public opinion that is inherent in popular culture has historically been considered as an important vessel to shape the political arena – regardless of the ultimate objective of its accelerators. Some films change the world in progressive directions, such as Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia*. Released in a context in which public awareness about HIV/AIDS virtually was non-existent and when polls suggested that a majority of the Americans desired to quarantine infected individuals, the film changed the public attitudes and awareness towards those afflicted by the virus (AP).

D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* from 1915 is another well-known example of a film changing public opinion towards a conservative, and perhaps a more morally despicable direction. By depicting the Ku Klux Klan as saviours from black soldiers of the black Union soldiers during the American Civil War, it caused the public support for the contemporary KKK to increase (Britannica). However, feature length Hollywood films have also been used to incite environmental awareness. Documentaries as *Blackfish* and *The Cove* made people question the whaling-industry, including popular attractions such as Sea World (O'Hara); *Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm* portrayed the anthropogenic agency of climate-change and *The Lorax* and *Bambi* raised awareness

regarding the sentience of non-human organisms. The latter even created a phenomenon called "The Bambi Effect", which is the instant objection one gets when faced with the idea of killing sentient creatures (Dicks).

During the 20th century another phenomenon also emerged in the United States – the superhero comic strip whose protagonists were fighting for a righteous cause due to the superhero comics' nature to mostly create a dichotomy between 'good vs. evil,' which is one reason for why they are interesting to analyse ideologically. Therefore, the four Avengers-films released between 2010-19 are chosen as the primary source for this thesis. A reason for why these four motion pictures are of particular interest is the fact that all of them are listed as three of the top ten highest grossing films of all time, which implies that they have a tremendous potential impact on society, as well as that they are well-known among students (Box Office). Thus, this material may serve as a great foundation to address more or less complex philosophical issues related to an area familiar to pupils in the EFL-classroom.

Climate issues and environmentalism are undoubtedly important questions for the upcoming generations. Greta Thunberg, a Swedish lower secondary pupil, incited organised climate strikes under the hashtag #fridaysforfuture with the purpose to urge leading politicians to act against climate-change, eventually inspiring other pupils from over 2,000 schools all around the globe to partake in this strike (Taylor et al.). Partially in favour of reducing the carbon footprint, more Swedish schools than ever before serve vegetarian food in the canteens as an alternative to meat. Coursebooks are nowadays available online, resulting in that trees are spared. Apart from previous curriculums, such as Lgy70, the contemporary curriculum explicitly mentions that all subjects ought to incorporate an environmental perspective (Natl. Ag. For Ed. *Curriculum* 7).

This thesis is aimed to investigate the relationship between biocentric and anthropocentric ideas carried by the protagonists and antagonists in the Hollywood

blockbuster tetralogy *The Avengers* produced by Kevin Feige, whereof the two first are directed by Joss Wheddon and the two last are directed by Joe and Anthony Russo. This thesis argues that the films promote anthropocentrism over biocentrism chiefly through their main protagonist Iron Man, whereas the ultimate villain, Thanos, represents biocentric ideals. Furthermore, this thesis discusses the applicability and relevance of ecocritically framing the Avengers-films in the EFL-classroom.

1.1 Synopsis of the *Avengers*-saga

Due to the vast video material, it is necessary for this thesis to deliver an outline for the combined narrative of the four films for readers unfamiliar with the *Avengers*-saga. Hence, a synopsis of the tetralogy follows to guide the reader through the story of the *Avengers*.

The *Avengers*-films is a collection of four superhero films belonging to a vast sequence of films frequently known as the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (MCU). The list of *Marvel*-films currently seems ever-expanding and to this date contains 22 feature-length films (Appendix A), with at least nine secretive productions to be released in the near future. All the films revolve around various superheroes, although all the films add up to a long and combined narrative. The current films can be divided into three phases, which all culminate in an *Avengers*-film (though the third phase ends with two consecutive *Avengers*-films) in which the superheroes combine their forces to battle an enemy threatening Earth by an impending apocalypse. In the first film, the Avengers consists of six heroes of which Iron Man, Captain America, Thor and the Hulk get most amount of time onscreen. However, this cohort expands in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Avengers: Infinity War* to finally compose a considerable army of superheroes in *Avengers: Endgame* the main protagonists virtually remain the same.

Joss Wheddon's *The Avengers* from 2012 initially expositions a spokesperson for the true alien villain of the MCU-narrative, Thanos, negotiating with Loki regarding letting him command his army called the Chitauri to conquer Earth in the exchange of a powerful cubic object known as the Tesseract – an object containing the Power Stone, which is one of six Infinity Stones that Thanos seeks in order to indiscriminately murder half of the creatures of the universe in his goal to achieve a sustainable universe. The Tesseract is located on Earth and S.H.I.E.L.D. (the Americentric "Homeland Security" of Earth in the MCU) is conducting research on it to unlock its potential power when Loki steals it. As counter-measure the head of S.H.I.E.L.D., Nick Fury, assembles the Avengers to contain the emerged issue. The rising action leads up to the crisis in which Loki uses the Tesseract to open up a portal to Earth for the Chitauri to enter Earth's atmosphere. However, Iron Man manages to direct a nuclear missile into the portal annihilating the Chitauri forces whilst another Avenger, Black Widow, simultaneously succeeds in closing the portal. The demigod Loki is brought back to Asgard by his brother Thor to be tried for his crimes and Loki's mighty sceptre is taken by a Nazi-rooted organisation called Hydra.

Avengers: Age of Ultron by Joss Wheddon revolves around another antagonist – Ultron, an artificial intelligence programme (AI) created by Tony Stark (Iron Man) whose mission is to establish world peace. A technology which Stark has attained after a raid on the Hydra headquarters located in Sokovia (a fictional landlocked nation in Central South-Eastern Europe). However, Ultron is capable of his own thoughts while simultaneously having access to all the information on the internet, which makes him draw the conclusion that the Avengers, and Tony Stark in particular, is responsible for the global war effort due to his arms business – Stark Industries. Ultron then uses his ability to navigate through the internet to employ any device with an internet connection to dissemble the Avengers and possesses a powerful robotic body, then he retreats to Sokovia. However, Tony Stark

uses Loki's sceptre which contains a powerful gem (later to be known as the Mind Stone) to create a similar but less homicidal AI and places it within a synthetic body – thus, creating the ally Vision. The eventual crisis of the film displays Ultron who uses a substance called "vibranium" which he has bought on the black market to lift the Sokovian city of Novi Grad skyward to then intend to send the massive piece of land plummeting towards Earth, creating an artificial asteroid collision with Earth. Nevertheless, the Avengers stops his scheme and evacuates all the citizens with the help pf S.H.I.E.L.D. But the film concludes with a twist; in the final scene of the dénouement Thanos, again, is presented as the instigator of the attempt to annihilate Earth.

The narration of the Russo-brother's *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* can be regarded as two episodes of the same storyline since they are currently the only Avengers-films chronologically overlapping each other in the MCU-saga. *Avengers: Infinity War* chronologically begins directly after the film *Thor: Ragnarök* when Asgard is destroyed, thus sending the Asgardians searching for a new home planet. However, their evacuation vessel is boarded by Thanos who kills half of the Asgardians and takes the Tesseract which contains the Power Stone. He places the stone in his Infinity Gauntlet to channel its inherent powers – making him mightier than before. The plot then revolves around Thanos locating and acquiring the rest of the Infinity Stones spread across the universe while the Avengers unsuccessfully attempt to stop him in two major battles on Thanos' home planet Titan and in the fictional Central African nation Wakanda. When Thanos finally has gathered all the Infinity Stones he reduces the amount of all living organisms to half.

Avengers: Endgame then resumes the story by depicting Hawkeye's family disappearing in an instant. To avenge humanity, the Avengers locate Thanos living in a cottage on a planet hoping to obtain the Infinity Stones and reverse the course of history to bring everyone back. However, Thanos has foreseen this and has therefore used the

Infinity Stones to destroy themselves. The Avengers then proceed to kill Thanos in his hut whereupon they return to Earth. Five years later civilisation is left in ruins, but by chance Ant-Man man is brought back from the quantum dimension (a place beyond subatomic level where time appears to flow chaotically, in which he got trapped in *Ant-Man and the Wasp* as a consequence of that his partner, the Wasp, was planning to retrieve him from there although she died in Thanos' scheme before managing to do so). With the knowledge to arrange organised time-travels developed by Tony Stark as well as the technology to realise them created by the late Hank Pym, the guru of Ant-Man, the Avengers decide to utilise this opportunity. With the ability to jump through time and space the Avengers manage to obtain all Infinity Stones before Thanos attained them which they use to resurrect all living creatures whereupon the film reaches its crisis and Thanos attacks their headquarters. After a final battle between the risen Avengers and Thanos accompanied by his Chitauri army, Iron Man finally sacrifices himself by using the Infinity Stones to annihilate Thanos and his devotees – an action which ultimately kills him.

1.2 Terminology

Since the chief concepts of this thesis are biocentrism and anthropocentrism it is vital to explain these concepts early on. *Biocentrism* is an ideal which recognises humans as a mere part of a biotic web of organisms that is more important than human interests (Buell *The Future* 134), whereas *anthropocentrism* is a system of belief which places humankind as the most important entity in the centre of existence (Garrard 206). Other, more or less central concepts are defined in Appendix B.

2 Ecocritical theory

Previous definitions of what encompasses ecocriticism have revolved around nature writing and romantic poetry (Buell *Environmental* 6-8). A voice redefining the boundaries of these previous conceptions of ecocriticism is Richard Kerridge, who argues that:

> The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as response to environmental crisis. (5)

Kerridge's definition thus expands the variety of texts on which ecocriticism is applicable. This new definition is essential for this thesis since it explores different perspectives on mankind's implied position in nature in contemporary Hollywood blockbuster films.

Since the tetralogy revolves around the so-called Earth's Mightiest Heroes one can assume that Earth is in danger by an impending anthropogenically-induced apocalypse, without any background knowledge of the actual plot. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish whether the antagonists' apocalyptic motives are cultural or ecological since Greg Garrard claims that secular eschatological narratives and apocalyptic rhetoric can be divided into two major foci – the end of human culture, and the end of the environment (97-98). Whereof the former is arguably representing a fear based on the ideas of anthropocentrism and the latter biocentrism. This is especially essential since the main antagonist, Thanos, can be interpreted as a eulogy to the Greek myth of the personification of death – Thanatos (Britannica). Furthermore, previous occurrences of Thanos in Marvel Comics have in 1977 depicted him as a diabolical supervillain who eradicates his own kin using nuclear weapons in order to show his

affection to Death (Starlin). Therefore, one can assume that the contemporary issues such as the nuclear arms race between NATO and the Warsaw Pact imprinted Thanos' motives and actions in 1977. Hence, one can assume that Thanos' means and measures are affected by the contemporary discourse of the production.

2.1 Biocentrism versus Anthropocentrism

Garrard defines anthropocentrism as a system of beliefs that deems humans to have a higher value than other organisms (206). This idea therefore requires a hierarchy of organisms defining each organism's value, based on the species' instrumental value to mankind – which Garrard points out most frequently is defined by economic interests (207). Similarly, Pat Brereton, lecturer at the Dublin City University describes anthropocentrism as the belief that nature is a resource contributing to human value, and he dichotomises it with what he refers to as "inherentism" – which most other scholars discuss as eco- or biocentrism (30). The anthropocentric perspective is dominated by traditional political ideologies whose limitations of nature are restricted to the idea of it as merely economic resources. The practiced lecturer in politics, Andrew Heywood argues that the anthropocentric relation to scientism has treated nature as a machine, implying that "it can be tinkered with, repaired, improved on or even replaced" (251). This implies that anthropocentrism generally considers climate issues to be managerial and that humankind is favoured to utilise the nature according to its own desires.

The prominent ecocritical theorist and Professor Emeritus in American Literature at Harvard University, Lawrence Buell, argues that anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are two binary stances discussing environmental issues. He states that the two concepts are not absolute and that there are many intermediate positions along the continuum between them. Buell describes the difference between the two ethical models as health of the physical environment versus interhuman equity and social welfare as primary concern

(*The Future* 97-98). In addition, Garrard argues that any given individual applies both anthropocentric and biocentric ideas depending on the context of the issue (25).

The Dutch PhD in political science and philosophy, Marcel Wissenburg, describes the relationship between metaphysical ethics of anthropocentrism and biocentrism as rather complex, and he distinguishes light and dark ecology by stating that dark ecology promotes fundamental societal change of mentality, whereas light ecology reckons that the current societal system is sufficient and that only minor individual alterations in lifestyle are necessary to change negative environmental trends. He claims that a radical position at the metaphysical level does not necessarily imply more moderate positions further down the abstraction levels, although biocentrism seems to promote dark- and deep ecology to a higher extent than anthropocentrism and vice versa (4). Wissenburg argues that biocentric ethics does not necessarily imply a deep ecological approach in the "real world" (4-5). However, Arne Næss, one of the most prominent names in the fields of intrinsic value theory and ecocriticism was a Norwegian professor in eco-philosophy. Often perceived as the founding father of deep ecology, Næss, states that anthropocentric deep ecology would be nothing but hypocritical (95).

Heywood, states that the cornerstone for all forms of green thought is ecology. He defines ecology as a growing recognition that living organisms are sustained by self-regulating ecosystems in which both living and non-living elements subsist. The ultimate objective is homeostasis – a balance between the organismal entities living within the complex web of ecosystems. In this endeavour for homeostasis, anthropocentrism conflicts with the ecological strife towards delicately balancing nature due to the existence of human societies with exponential population growth, pollution and depletion of finite resources endangering the very existence of homeostatic ecosystems and biodiversity (Heywood 248-49).

This dichotomy between biocentrism and anthropocentrism will be used in order to illustrate the relationship between characters and their perception of mankind's role in nature. More explicitly, if humans are argued to be in centre of existence, if they are considered to have a higher intrinsic value than the rest of nature and if speciesism is promoted through expressing a species' instrumental value to humans, they ultimately also promote anthropocentrism.

2.2 Malthusianism

The Anglican parson, Thomas Robert Malthus, is one of the most prominent names regarding the concern for demographic development from an ecological perspective (Garrard 102-03). In Malthus' *Principle of Population* he argues that there is a conflict between the human population and the production of the Earth, and that this balance is necessary for humanity as a whole. He builds his reasoning on two postulates; that human needs nourishment to survive, and that human desire to reproduce remains unchanged. If there are no obstacles to these postulates the population will increase geometrically while the comestible assets increase arithmetically, which then lead to issues regarding human livelihood (4-6, 9). Malthus also states that a discrepancy between the means of subsistence and population ultimately and naturally results in famine and misery as well as the power to control the population is unobtainable without also "producing misery or vice" (10-13).

Malthus argues that a future environmental crisis is inevitable due to an exponentially increasing world population causing decreasing and insufficient finite resources or epidemics (74-75). Other deep ecologists have taken a radical approach by advocating a controlled reduction of world population in favour of sustainability. Within this field one can locate extreme deep ecologists, such as Pentti Linkola, who promotes totalitarianism and genocides in favour of environmental sustainability and biodiversity.

To Dana Milbank of the *Wall Street Journal* Linkola declared that "If there were a button I could press, I would sacrifice myself without hesitating, if it meant millions of people would die"(1). In contrast to many other deep ecologists Linkola is not an academic, but nevertheless, his ideas have made a serious impact on the environmental debate in Finland.

This is perhaps also why the major contributor to the ecocritical perspective within literature studies, Garrard, illuminates deep ecology as one of the most radical and misanthropic forms of green philosophy – mainly due to the field's ambition to seek a reduction in world population to achieve environmental sustainability (23-25).

2.3 Capitalism, Ecology and Utilitarianism

A question worth asking is whether consumerism ever can be implemented within the expression of environmentalism? Garrard denies that there is a genuine relationship between consumerism and ecologism as he, among other ecocritical scholars, label the advocators of this perspective the somewhat pejorative term 'cornucopian' in order to elucidate this ingenuine bond by relating them to the Greek myth of a utopian horn containing unlimited resources (18-21). The advocators of this perspective often argue that issues such as the climate-change is exaggerated and illusory by vocalising scepticism towards anthropogenically expediated global warming (18-20). Brereton uses the terms light and dark ecology to define the differences between the cornucopian economists and deep ecologists. To illustrate this dichotomy, he uses Jonathan Porritt's taxonomy regarding ecological thinking in which he contrasts the politics of industrialism and ecology (Appendix C). Nevertheless, Porritt's taxonomy involves concepts such as "rationality" versus "intuition" whereof the former is regarded as an industrial value and the latter an ecological value, and this is of course not axiomatically true and applicable

on all given contexts since for example "intuition" does not necessarily account for ecologism.

The chief reason for not applying the otherwise highly relevant dichotomy of "environmentalism" versus "ecologism" is that Garrard argues that environmentalism and the cornucopian economists' position are two separate perspectives of which the former denies anthropogenically expediated climate-change, whereas the latter is a broad spectrum of people concerned with climate issues but who does not promote radical social change in favour of the climate (18-23). Therefore, the other dichotomies most distinctively related to the environment will be used in order in the present study to classify the characters as how much they care for environmental issues (Appendix C). This taxonomy will be compared with characters' ambitions and actions in order to classify their relationship towards the environment and place them into the categories: cornucopian economists or deep ecologists.

An imperative aspect to consider is - how could something that is driven by profit, such as the world's highest grossing film franchise, denounce consumerism without being considered hypocritical? Wissenburg believes that ideas, such as capitalism and socialism, sprung out previously non-green movements and born in times when the environment was out of fashion, can only be considered at most environmentalist, and thus they inherit little actual interest for the environment compared with a deep ecologist's perspective (4-5). However, Wissenburg presents no other alternative than the deep ecological approach if one genuinely favours the environment. And one may assume that if a fundamental societal change of mentality is aimed for, the contemporary system is a suitable vessel to transfer an idea to the masses. Otherwise, any deep ecological organisation with a Facebook page would not be considered anything more than environmentalist as well – which would stir up some emotions among members of Greenpeace. Nevertheless, Garrard considers Greenpeace as a successful organisation

balancing between the philosophies of deep ecology and environmentalism by retaining their radical activist approach while encouraging green consumerism and recycling (23). However, there are certain aspects which may seem hypocritical to a blockbuster film such as James Cameron's *Avatar* – although it criticises and actualises environmental issues such as depleting natural resources, it still sparked a multibillion commercial industry in its wake.

The Capitalist struggle for perpetual growth and stimulating demand will perhaps always lie in the background for any major motion picture produced by billion-dollar film industries. But that is not the sole problem regarding environmental issues in Hollywood blockbuster cinema: Niklas Salmose, doctor and lecturer in English literature at Linneaus University has written several articles regarding ecocriticism in film. In his "Behemoth, Nostalgia and Ecological Agency" he asserts that the generic narrative of Hollywood motion pictures and their strive to conservatively restore everything to normal often compromises ecological agency in cli-fi films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (239).

Combined with Heywood's verdict that industrialism is often perceived as an issue among green theorists who regard it as the single most imperative aspect enabling the anthropogenic exploitation of nature, perhaps makes deep ecological blockbusters an oxymoron? Industrialism according to Heywood is, per se, dedicated to "materialism, utilitarian values, absolute faith in science and a worship of technology," which makes the industrial ideal in contrast to ecologism highly relevant to juxtapose with the utilitarian character Iron Man (254-55).

However, utilitarianism has also been implemented in environmental ethics by well-known authors such as Peter Singer who points out that animals are sentient, and therefore they desire to evade inflictions of pain. Due to these circumstances Singer also condemns the fact that animals are defined by their instrumental value to humans since it evokes speciesism (185-187). Hence, his environmental ethics regarding the value of

animals is also shared with deep ecologists (Heywood 251). According to Heywood, the difference between the deep ecological ethics promoted by Næss and the animal rights ethics of Singer is that the deep ecological ethics also includes non-sentient beings such as trees, grass and the ecosystems in which organismal entities reside (257).

Eco-conservatives draw from the nostalgic attachment to rural life and espouse green capitalism by adopting environmental ideas and applying them to the market mechanism. Hence, the eco-conservatives rely on climate-change to be a management issue for humans to control, which conflicts with the ecological perspective that anthropocentrism is "an offence against the principles of ecology" (Heywood 261, 268). Thus, environmental ideas reside within the anthropocentric perspective, although the genuineness of this concern is contested by biocentric intercessors.

2.4 "The Shallow and the Deep"

Næss provides an excellent distinction between deep ecology and environmentalism in his article; "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement." Environmentalism, or shallow ecology according to Næss, is an anthropocentric ecological movement which primarily focuses on "the health and affluence of people the developed countries" (95). Garrard describes shallow ecology as a philosophy calling for preservation of natural resources in favour of social welfare and interhuman equity, and that the distinction between the two philosophies resides in whether or not to apply intrinsic value theory (24). The idea of intrinsic value revolves around the datum that all life possesses an equal value in its own, regardless of its instrumental value to humans (207).

The Dutch professor in humanistic and environmental philosophy, Wouter Achterberg, differentiates the somewhat interchangeable ideas of ecologism and environmentalism. Ecologism belongs in the biocentric perspective, whereas

environmentalism resides within anthropocentrism. Achterberg defines environmentalism as the superficial belief that environmental issues are solely management problems, calling for a continuum of lifestyles (84-85). However, apart from the cornucopian economists' position, environmentalists acknowledge the anthropogenic climate-change and try to make eco-friendly choices throughout life as long as the consequences of their choices do not affect their living standards significantly (Garrard 21-23). Heywood makes a distinction between shallow- and deep ecology and reckons that shallow ecologists use the ecological ideas for human necessities through embracing values such as sustainability and conservation, whereas deep ecologists seek to maintain nature by focusing on biodiversity, bio-egalitarianism and decentralisation (249). Hence, shallow ecology and environmentalism consist of anthropocentric values while deep ecology is associated with bio- and ecocentrism. This concept of deep ecology has also been mentioned in the pejorative term of "ecofascism" due to its prioritised concern of functioning ecosystems over human poverty and disease (Buell *The Future* 137-38).

Timothy Clark claims there is a major dispute between the ethics of Næss and Singer, which mainly revolves around how they perceive invasive species (180-81). While Singer calls for liberty, equality and fraternity for all animals, including invasive species (185-87), Næss may be perceived as the warden of the ecosystem due to his major concern lies within a functioning ecosystem (96). The difference can be illustrated with Clark's example of when humans have attempted to restore ecosystems to equilibrium, such as invasive feral goats on the Galápagos being slaughtered on an industrial scale to prevent them from harming the ecosystem and its domestic species (179-81). Hence, the idea of biodiversity can contradict the idea of bio-egalitarianism since the biodiverse perspective may be inhibited by each individual's right to live and vice versa. Even though the idea of fully functioning ecosystems might seem appealing, the deep ecological ideas of biodiversity pave way for ecofascist and even racist agendas when the

lesser value of "invasive species" is applied on humanity itself (Clark 59, 181). Nevertheless, Heywood asserts that a radical form of Singer's bio-egalitarianism may also result in mass-slaughter since it is only applicable on sentient organisms, which according to him leaves out for example disabled people unable of sentience (257).

2.5 Relevance of Ecocriticism and Film in School

One of the benefits of using film in the classroom, instead of audio alone, is that the students get to perceive paralinguistic behaviour and that the video communication also includes cross-cultural clues which help the students to comprehend the narrative (Harmer 343).

Bo Lundahl claims that reading images requires the same logic as reading literary texts and that in order to comprehend an image one has to thoroughly examine it and he emphasises the ability to read the images critically (456). Lundahl additionally states that when engaging with images one can do so by analysing images and motion pictures focusing on four different aspects: Either for example by examining perspectives, choice of motives; by placing the image in its social, historical and/or cultural background; relating the images to own experiences; or studying the images through a critical lens to deepen one's knowledge regarding them (458).

Lundahl also asserts that youths acquire more culture from motion pictures than from magazines or books (465). However, apart from the students' presumed high ability to engage with film, this could also develop into a disadvantage since they might associate the activity with relaxation (Harmer 344). Hence, it is imperative to begin the teaching sequence by giving the students an assignment related to the video material to actively engage them with the films. Yet another advantage of using film is that it is an excellent medium due to it is a relatively economical choice in comparison with buying novels for an entire class (Lundahl 465). One suggestion appropriate for this thesis is to examine

characterisation whilst focusing on the role of protagonists and antagonists and/or representation of ideas (469-71). However, since the combined length video material of this study exceeds ten hours it is unthinkable to use the full length of the films in the classroom since merely watching the films would consume a tenth of the entire time frame of an upper secondary English course (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. *Curriculum* 5-8). Therefore, it is either preferable to use a selection of scenes for the students to analyse (Lundahl 465), or to let the students consume the material outside effective lesson time.

The Swedish curriculum also urges the schools to incorporate the environmental perspective in teaching to help the student better understand and counter anthropogenic agency as well as develop a personal approach to global environmental issues (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. *Curriculum* 6). A failure to include ecological thinking and literacy in the classroom already from the start creates students unaware of their agency on issues such as global warming and pollution, which is comparable with "trying to balance a checkbook without knowing arithmetic" according to the distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and Politics, David W. Orr (85-86). However, in order to highlight complex multifaceted environmental issues within the classroom Orr suggests that the teaching ought to be interdisciplinary in order for it to be fruitful (90). Surely, having the students analyse the environmental issues addressed in the Avengers-series can constitute one part of an interdisciplinary teaching sequence, but it can also be complemented with demographical issues presented in History- or Geography classes, through discussing the advantages and disadvantages of different energy sources in Physics or by addressing the issues of anthropogenic agency of global warming in Biology. This premise is also underlined in the curriculum which obliges all teachers to let their students study interdisciplinary (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. *Curriculum* 10). Hence, it is highly favourable to conduct interdisciplinary teaching sequences regarding ecocriticism. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary complexity of ecocriticism is not the sole issue when applying ecocriticism in the classroom.

According to Sieglinde Grimm and Berbeli Wanning ecocriticism is often perceived to be sprung from left-wing ideas, which can polarise the classroom dialogue and sacrifice teacher neutrality (514-515).

However, the syllabus for English 7 states the following on "content of communication" which arguably legitimise discussing the more complex issues entailing ecocritical theory:

- Theoretical and complex subject areas, also of a more scientific nature, related to students' education, chosen specialisation area, societal issues and working life; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; cultural expressions in modern times and historically, such as literary periods.

- Societal issues, cultural, historical, political and social conditions, and also ethical and existential issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. (Natl. Ag. For Ed. *English* 11)

This opens up for deep philosophical ideas to be shared, discussed and contested within the classroom, even those of political character.

3 Methodological considerations

The method for acquiring the data supporting the thesis is qualitative since the foundation of the study is a close-reading of *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. The films are then analysed through an audio-visual text analysis primarily focusing on the ideas and actions of the protagonists and antagonists. These sifted ideas and actions are the ones interpreted to wholly or partially concern environmental issues.

For the thesis to be operational the focus will be directed towards the protagonists and the antagonists of each film since heroes and villains serve as excellent tools in order to channel ideas. If other, more neutral characters, were used as foundation for analysis it

would be more difficult to argue for any underlying environmental inclination of the films. Also, the average viewer or pupil tends to focus on the relationship between the main characters simply by the natural fact that they receive the longest screen time, making it more interesting to focus on them for this study. Therefore, the relationship between protagonists and antagonists is seen to create a dichotomy in which it is easier to justify that the films are inclined to feature a certain message.

The only yet legal method for acquiring *Avengers: Endgame* is to analyse it at the cinema. The implications of this are that the film cannot be paused and reflected on, no electronic devices are allowed which means that when taking notes, a functioning system for this is required. Therefore, a notebook and a white shirt is brought to better reflect the light of the screen onto the notebook in the otherwise dark cinema. To arrange time references an analogue watch is used, which implies that the time references for *Avengers: Endgame* are approximate, give or take thirty seconds.

4 Ecological conflicts and representations in MCU

This analysis aims to distinguish biocentric and anthropocentric ideas primarily represented by the main antagonist Thanos, and the main protagonist Iron Man. Succeeding these analyses three brief investigations revolving other protagonists such as Captain America, Ant-Man and Dr.Strange follow. The fourth section then targets a broad discussion regarding the Avengers-series as a whole.

4.1 Thanos

The initial section regarding Thanos is divided into four subsections: The first subsection contrasts Thanos and his biocentric incentives; the second revolves around the inner conflicts within his biocentric ideal; the third focuses on the Malthusian ideas behind Thanos' plan regarding controlled reduction of humankind; and the final subsection

discusses some of the inconsistencies in Thanos' rationale throughout the Avengers-series.

4.1.1 Biocentrism

After Thanos has achieved his ultimate aim he retires to his home planet where the flora now is flourishing, he withdraws to cultivate the earth while living in a pastoral chalet. His utopia can also be compared with the ecological ideal of the garden of Eden (*Endgame* 00:13:00)

Given that Porritt argues that the "politics of ecology" advocates discrimination of technology, local production, self-reliance, production for use and harmony with nature one can draw the conclusion that Thanos' motives were indeed ecological from the start (Appendix C), since this garden of Eden and revitalising his dead home planet seems to be the ultimate target of his ambition. Combined with Wissenburg's heuristic device for defining green thought, this philosophical perspective can be argued to promote dark ecology (4), which also would imply that Thanos' ideas derive from a biocentric perception of the world.

Nevertheless, the Avengers localise Thanos and capture him in the belief that all Infinity Stones are intact and that the cataclysm is reversible. When they hesitantly question why he destroyed the stones he states that the stones were only a tool for achieving sustainability and that "beyond that it [the omnipotent power] was only temptation" (*Endgame* 00:16:00). Considering the fact that he in *Avengers: Infinity War* sacrifices his own daughter to achieve his ultimate goal of a sustainable world, these aspects constitute an idealistic antagonist rather than a homicidal and irrational megalomaniac.

4.1.2 Næss vs. Singer

Avengers: Endgame proceeds the narrative of *Avengers: Infinity War* and begins with the cataclysmic event occasioned by Thanos. The initial scene portrays Clint Barton, also known as the hero Hawkeye, and how he sees his family vanishing in an instant after Thanos has reduced all living organisms in the universe to half. Except for delivering the audience an indication regarding the synopsis, this scene also presents the personal, immediate and tragic loss that an abrupt and unbiased reduction of the population will lead to. This indiscriminate selection speaks for Thanos advocating biospherical egalitarianism since he is omnipotent after acquiring all Infinity Stones, yet he decides to let chance select whose life to end – regardless of the fact that he has a powerful opposition which he potentially could eliminate. This coincides with Næss' definition of the concept; that all life has an equal and intrinsic value (96). Therefore, Thanos chooses not to interfere with chance, due to that he subsequently would have to rank life based on the instrumental value to him – which according to Garrard would imply an application of anthropocentric ethics (206-207).

Although Thanos arguably advocates biocentrism due to his idea that a controlled decrease of population is necessary to combat climate-issues derives from the deep ecological idea which was initially addressed by Malthus and later adopted ecological extremists such as Linkola, there are some inherent conflicts in his biocentric ethics.

Thanos does not favour bio-egalitarianism in terms of Peter Singer's definition since when he applies his idea of "life" on the biosphere he refers merely to sentient creatures (Singer 185). As far as the biodiverse aspect of biocentrism is concerned, he does not prioritise any life over the other since the selection of lives to perish are "random, dispassionate and fair to rich and poor alike" (*Infinity War* 01:47:00). This selection contradicts the idea of biodiversity due to Næss' statement regarding anthropogenic modifications, such as domesticated animals or invasive species (96). Although, in

Avengers: Endgame he inconsequentially changes his mind due to the resistance of terrestrial survivors by claiming that life remembering what was once lost can impossibly be grateful for its existence and therefore needs to be eradicated in order for new life to flourish (02:08:00).

However, there is a green value in the depiction of Thanos' absence of bias. Suppose that Thanos applied Næss' idea of biodiversity, although extended it to incorporate humans. That would make him an archetype of the malevolent villain by following ethics promoted by history's most disreputable instigators of genocide. Hence, his ecological agenda would be deemed unrelatable to the viewers and the films would thus be considered anti-environmentalist. It is in this idealistically static, yet morally ambiguous characterisation of Thanos that he becomes a potentially compelling idealist, instead of a genuinely abhorrent fiend.

However, Thanos' lack of concern of the idea of biodiversity also makes him seem misinformed or deceptive since his aim is a cosmic ecological equilibrium. Any rational and well-read being comprehends that certain creatures are more important for a sustainable ecosystem than others which is expressed by Næss (96-97), and by unprejudicially reducing all life to half implies that there already would be a balance between creatures in the ecosystems. Furthermore, if Thanos' major concern is the flora, he must acknowledge the fact that pollinators are essential for the procreation of seed plants which also makes his unbiased rationalisation illogic. A possible explanation for this is that Thanos symbolises the inconsistencies and tensions present in the ecological movement that revolve around whether to prioritise the health of the ecosystems or each creature's right to its own life (Clark 180-81).

In the midpoint of *Avengers: Endgame,* the Avengers manage to restore time and space to before the outcome of Thanos' plans, through the discovery of time travels. Instantly after the restoration Ant-Man looks outside a window and sees sparrows in a

tree chirping in harmony. He perceives them in solitude whilst gently touching the glass, but the tranquillity is abruptly ruined by Thanos' missiles devastating the Avengers' headquarters and the area around it.

When scrutinising Thanos' actions in this short scene, he is for the first time in the storyline portrayed ideologically irrational and purely evil since the scene implies that he has detachedly eliminated fifty percent of all domesticised cattle as well half of all nearly extinct species (*Endgame* 00:10:00). This contradicts the biocentric strive for biodiversity which according to Buell is a central aspect of biocentrism (*The Future* 135), and Næss' claim that pursuit for retaining biodiversity is fundamental to the deep ecological approach (96).

4.1.3 Malthusian Equilibrium
In the same manner Malthus endorses balance between Earth's production and its population, Thanos claims that this equilibrium is displaced and needs alteration (74-75). In a dialogue with Gamora he proclaims that the surviving part of the population on her home planet Zan-Whoberi has thrived after Thanos' massacre by assuring her that the babies contemporarily born there "know nothing but full bellies and clear skies." After Gamora then distances herself from the idea of mass-murder by questioning Thanos' aberrant procedures, he attempts to rationalise the murdering by comparing it to simple calculus and geography. Thanos then proceeds to affirm that: "This universe is finite, its resources finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction" (*Infinity War* 01:06:45). In this scene Thanos demonstrates a concern for depletion of natural resources as well as assures Gamora that his solution has been proven to be successful.

Another scene that addresses Thanos' necessity of balance is when Gamora recalls the invasion of her home and when her mother was taken from her by Thanos' Chitauri

forces. In this scene Thanos notices a young Gamora devastated by the immense trauma she goes through and tries to divert her attention from the slaughter by taking her away from the turmoil. Thereafter he gives Gamora a double-edged bejewelled knife as he tells her that it is "Perfectly balanced, as all things should be. Too much to one side or the other. . . [the knife falls from his hand]" (*Infinity War* 00:43:50). Even though this scene does not explicitly refer to Thanos' concern for the environment one can draw such a conclusion based on his previous statements regarding sustainable balance between the population and the planet's production.

Ebony Maw, the right hand of Thanos, also asserts his superior's motives in several scenes when Thanos and the Chitauri forces invade a planet. The first scene in which Ebony Maw is introduced is in the exposition of *Avengers: Infinity War* when he claims pre-eminence over the Asgardian vessel they have boarded by implying that their lives contribute to a greater cause – to tip the universal scale towards balance (00:01:25). When Thanos' forces later invade Earth to locate two of the Infinity Stones, Ebony Maw yet again declares his perceived superiority and his motives by blazoning: "Hear me and rejoice. You are about to die at the hands of the Children of Thanos. Be thankful that your meaningless lives are now contributing to the balance. . . [interrupted by Iron Man]." (*Infinity War* 00:19:33). However, not only the contemporary and former accomplices of Thanos seem to acknowledge his incentives but also Bruce Banner who in explaining who Thanos is to Tony Stark asserts that Thanos' goal is to reduce fifty percent of the human population and assures him that Thanos was the mastermind behind the Chitauri attack on New York led by Loki (*Infinity War* 00:14:10).

In relation to Buell's description of the relationship between biocentrism and anthropocentrism, Thanos shows little concern for interhuman equity and social welfare, instead he focuses on the health of the physical environment since his actions clearly affect the health of the wilderness in a positive manner, whereas human welfare contrarily

is affected in a negative way (*The Future* 98). However, the historical example of the Black Death affected the social welfare of its survivors positively since they inherited the assets left by its victims, but a similar aspect is not addressed in *Avengers: Endgame*; instead the Earth is left in ruins and despair which is shown by empty rusting cars standing in the middle of the streets five years after the reduction of mankind. These empty rusty cars thus become a symbol for nature inevitably conquering culture.

Inevitability is also an interesting aspect of Thanos in the MCU-saga. Right before Thanos clenches his fist to snap his fingers and reduce the population of the universe to half in both *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, he states that: "I [Thanos] am inevitable" (*Endgame* 02:30:00). This statement can be perceived as he either is alluding to the Greek myth of Thanatos by implying that death is inevitable, or he refers to himself as the carrier of biocentric ideals implying that nature will in time always prevail over culture. An interesting aspect of the utterance of this one-liner in *Avengers: Endgame* is that during this moment Iron Man has seized the Infinity Stones whereupon he responds: "And I [momentary pause] am [momentary pause] Iron Man," then he eradicates Thanos and his Chitauri army by harnessing the power of the Infinity Stones. Hence, he symbolically conquers the inevitability of nature's impending triumph over humanity.

4.1.4 Biocentrism on a continuum

There are some inconsistencies in Thanos' motives throughout the film series. In *The Avengers,* Thanos' ambition is to acquire the Tesseract which in *Avengers: Infinity War* becomes known to contain the Power Stone. However, at this point Loki's sceptre is unknowingly embodying the Mind Stone which makes one question why Thanos did not deprive Loki of the sceptre already from the start and invade Earth himself to attain the Power Stone. Furthermore, this is not the only scene which diverts Thanos from the

ecological motive. In last scene of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* Thanos appears and claims that he has to exterminate the humans himself after Ultron's failure in Sokovia. In this scene it appears as if Thanos' aim is to eradicate life on Earth. The origin of these inconsistencies is presumably rooted in the fact that the two first films and the two last films have different directors and screenwriters with possibly divergent visions. Furthermore, the actualisation of melting polar ice caps, the declining biomass of undomesticated animals, plastic pollution in the oceans and the American climate-change debate might have had an impact in the creation of a contemporary Thanos. Since the previous appearances of him in Marvel Comics have revolved around him using nuclear weapons to mass-murder his own kin in *Avengers Annual 7* from 1977 (Starlin), one can conclude that his motives then were a contemporary creation due to the nuclear arms race between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and the public fear of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

4.2 Iron Man

The second section concerning Iron Man analyses his materialist ambitions as well as his anthropocentric ethics and is aimed to deduce whether he has any environmentalist ideas. This section is contrasted with Jonathan Porritt's taxonomy regarding the politics of industrialism and ecology (Wissenburg 28-29), which will motivate if his ethics belongs in Garrard's definition of the cornucopian economists' position or if he is positioned within the concept of environmentalism (18-23). To locate Iron Man within the field of the anthropocentric field of environmentalism, Heywood's "Conflicts Within Green Ideology" is used to refute that his ethics resides within the biocentric position (Appendix D).

4.2.1 Materialism

Dualistically, Tony Stark (Iron Man) retreats to a lakeside cabin in the woods after the

Avengers have been defeated by Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* whereas Thanos retires

to his home planet Titan. But there is a major difference between Thanos' and Tony

Stark's retreats to nature; their utilisation of technology. Stark's cabin is equipped with

state-of-the-art technology whereas Thanos retreats to a place where no sign of

technology is to be found, the only objects in his simple cottage are a bed and a cooking

pot. In relation to Porritt's taxonomy, Thanos is presumed to endorse an ecological policy

whereas Stark promotes the policy of industrialism (Appendix C). Tony Stark's motives

for moving with his family to the lakeside cabin can also be related to his nostalgic

attachment to nature which suitably is a property of eco-conservatism according to

Heywood (261).

Money and perpetual economic growth almost seem necessities for the Avengers

to have a slightest chance against Thanos since without it there would be no Iron Man

saving the day in *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Endgame*. Iron Man initially made his

fortune by selling weapons to morally dubious parties (*The Avengers* 01:08:30) but has

later reformed his business to focus on clean energy (*The Avengers* 01:08:45). The assets

acquired from his business are used to construct technology appropriate to engage with

any hostile force threatening the Earth and its inhabitants. In *The Avengers* Iron Man for

example uses his AI, Jarvis, and his iron suit to intercept a nuclear missile and direct it

towards the Chitauri portal, and in *Avengers: Endgame* he constructs a gauntlet using

nanotechnology, appropriate to harness the powers of the Infinity Stones. Henceforth,

resurrecting all the people lost in *Avengers: Infinity War* and sealing the destinies of

Thanos and his army. Perpetual growth, free market economy and materialism are

therefore essential for Iron Man to combat exterior threats in the MCU-saga. Thus, he

clearly embodies the policies of industrialism to a certain extent (Appendix C).

But money is also mentioned as medium to create incentives. For example, in the beginning of *The Avengers* Black Widow is sent to convince Bruce Banner to join the team. This scene is taking place in an impoverished district in India in which a girl wants Banner to follow her and cure her ill father. By waving a small bundle of money, the girl convinces him to go with her, but when she disappears Banner seems contrite and tells himself that he should have taken the money up-front (00:16:30). Similarly, in *Avengers: Endgame* Tony Stark jestingly threatens to sell his daughter's toys if she does not go to bed as if materialism is the single most effective tool he has in his arsenal when negotiating with children (00:41:00).

4.2.2 Anthropocentrism

Even though climate-change is addressed in two scenes in *Avengers: Endgame,* Tony Stark seems to perceive threats against the Earth as management issues. This is manifested through his belief in that climate-friendly technology will revert future climate issues. Even though Buell and Garrard argue that the relationship between biocentrism and anthropocentrism is not absolute, a dynamic combination between the ethics is more likely to be found in utilitarian characters – which in the case of *The Avengers* comprises Iron Man. This notion is most palpable in a scene in which Tony Stark discovers time-travelling after a discussion with Captain America in which he claims to like and embrace his new life. Stark whose family has survived the biospherical reduction contemplates whether or not to disclose his findings regarding time-travels to the rest of the Avengers. He tells his wife, Pepper Potts, that: "I should lock the idea (of time-travels) in a box and drop it on the bottom of the ocean" (*Endgame* 00:44:00). The circumstance that his family has survived makes him hesitate in the fear of jeopardising the lives of his loved ones, and this makes him momentarily embrace the world he now lives in although he quickly changes his mind after consulting with his wife.

In the same scene, Pepper Potts reads a magazine on composting – an idea which he seems highly open towards (*Endgame* 00:43:00). This can be related to Garrard's idea of recycling as environmentalism implying that said individual makes small changes in their daily lives without renouncing their living standards (21-23).

According to Wissenburg's notion of anthropocentrism as ideas, Iron Man's capitalist ideal would be placed within his definition of "grue", and therefore he is not considered to be environmentalist (4). However, since he seems open to composting to decrease his family's carbon footprint as well as his pursuit for clean energy sources this places him somewhere in Garrard's definition of the environmentalist approach since he thus is an advocator of green ideas. Hence, he seems open to personal changes in favour of the climate as long as they do not interfere with his contemporary living standard and his company's perpetual growth. Nevertheless, it is clear that his idea of the world is founded on the anthropocentric perspective since when applying Heywood's "Tensions Within Green Ideology" juxtaposed with his utilitarian ethics he is striving towards sustainable growth rather than anti-growth and environmentalism rather than ecologism (Appendix D). Thus, his perception of the world cannot be seen as biocentric since his actions and ideas would have to be represented by any of the deep ecological ideals promoted by Næss.

4.3 Other Protagonists

The analysis now proceeds to the third section in which anthropocentric and biocentric ideas and actions of other protagonists are investigated in relation to the theoretical frameworks enunciated by Garrard and Clark. This part mainly focuses on the characters Captain America, Ant-Man and Dr. Strange since they contribute to some interesting eco-ideological discrepancies within the group of protagonists.

4.3.1 Captain America

Captain America desires to save everyone, even when the expense is that others will die – which explicitly is the case of the hovering city of Sokovia in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. For him, human value is inestimable since he is driven by duty towards his country and to mankind which makes him a deontological character. Captain America could thus be seen to represent the ideas of the nation since he perceives the USA to be the standard for democracy and human welfare. Nevertheless, in one scene Captain America seems to cherish the aesthetics of nature when he tries to stay positive after Thanos has wiped out half of all living creatures in the universe by stating that he recently saw a live whale calf which he concludes to be a result of fewer ships and cleaner water – albeit, at the cost of human lives which Black Widow reminds him of whereupon his facial expression turns from comfort to malaise (*Endgame* 00:29:00). Even though Captain America acknowledges anthropogenic agency of climate-change by trying to rationalise the outcome of losing against Thanos he still prioritises human life over for example aquatic creatures.

Yet another scene which highlights Captain America's anthropocentric perspective and his recognition of human value is from the scenes revolving the levitating city of Novi Grad in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. As the massive rock is rising the potential impact on the world increases. Iron Man contemplates obliterating the rock whereas Captain America refuses these measures. For Iron Man human value is measured in statistics whereas Captain America finds human life inestimable (*Age of Ultron* 1:50:30).

4.3.2 Dr.Strange and Ant-Man

Dr. Strange is perhaps one of the most powerful protagonists in the MCU. He supposedly rejects material aspects in life to acquire the ability to shape time and place from Himalayan monks in his first appearance in the MCU-saga – Scott Derrickson's *Dr. Strange* from 2016. However, he does not seem to apply this supposed ontological

spirituality in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Instead he and his assistant, Wong, appear awfully

materialist for being a practising Buddhist. This is especially palpable in one scene which

becomes interesting to compare with Ant-Man's plausible veganism. The scene in mind

revolves around Dr. Strange descending a staircase to exit a downtown Buddhist temple

in New York to buy something to eat, whereupon Wong has a superficial objection

towards Dr. Strange going out to order fast-food:

> Wong: "Attachment to the material means detachment from the spiritual."
>
> Dr. Strange: I'll tell the guys at the deli. Maybe they'll make you a metaphysical
> ham of rye.
>
> Wong: Oh. Wait, wait, wait. I think I have 200.
>
> Dr. Strange: Dollars?
>
> Wong: Rupees.
>
> Dr. Strange: Which is?
>
> Wong: [sighs] A buck and a half. (00:10:40)

Even though the monk rejects materialism his ideals seem superficial since he knows the

value of both rupees and dollars. Thus, this scene stresses the idea that even if one's life

is dedicated to reject materialism it seems undesirable and even impossible to live a life

without consumerism. This rejection of spiritualism in contrast with the appreciation of

materialism thus constitutes anthropocentric ideas (Heywood 251).

Juxtaposed with Ant-Man, Dr. Strange is held in high regard among other

protagonists. This perhaps becomes most obvious in the trust put in him to control the

outcome of the final fight with Thanos in *Avengers: Endgame* by the main protagonist,

Iron Man (02:29:00). Ant-Man on the other hand is portrayed as irresponsible and

unintelligent in comparison which is perhaps most profoundly showcased through his

somewhat childish belief that time-travels works in the same way as portrayed in *Back to

the Future* and *Terminator* (*Endgame* 00:33:00), and that he is bullied by other characters

such as Rocket who addresses him as "Little Puppy" in a childish voice (*Endgame* 01:05:00).

This is interesting since Ant-Man is the only character who presumably can be deduced as vegan, or at least flexitarian. This idea derives from a scene in which Ant-Man sits outside the Avengers' headquarters and is about to eat a vegan taco carefully prepared in a lunchbox, whereupon the protagonist War Machine lands in a haughty and condescending manner, sending his precious taco airborne (*Endgame* 00:47:00). The reasons for why the hierarchal position of the presumably vegan Ant-Man is low, whereas the meat-eating Buddhist character Dr. Strange is arguably higher, could of course be coincidental. However, veganism is chiefly a value residing within the biocentric worldview (unless the reason for being vegan is based on one's concern for the own health) (Heywood 257-58), whereas meat-eating implies an anthropocentric perspective since the animals killed in the process are used for their instrumental value to humans (Næss 95).

4.4 The Films

This final section of the analysis targets the films as a tetralogy and consists of a discussion regarding the commercialist blockbuster cinema from an ecological perspective followed by an analysis of the representation of animals. This section investigates the issues with producing film intended to generate profit and is thus contrasted with the aims and policies of deep ecology described by Næss, as well as the portrayal of animals and their function and value to humans which is contrasted with the ideas of intrinsic and instrumental value described by Singer. Conclusively, it addresses the potential ideological impact the films' antagonists' position can have on their viewers.

4.4.1 Commercialism

Commercialism clearly is a part of attending the cinema – the spectators buy their tickets, edibles and beverages before savouring the cinematic experience. Prior to showing the films commercials are rolling and right before *Avengers: Endgame* starts a Samsung commercial encourages the spectators to update their mobile phones according to the latest technological fix – Samsung S10 plus.

Embedded marketing is also part of the Marvel experience. Most of these commercials revolve around the playboy Tony Stark who always happens to drive various Audi sport models. In the dénouement of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* he drives an orange technologically augmented Audi capable of driving itself, which potentially could be portrayed as malfunctioning, thus following the otherwise partially comic irony of the narrative of the Marvel films – but it is not. It works impeccably fine in the same manner James Bond's highly technological Aston Martins and BMW:s do. This is then juxtaposed with Hawkeye's so-called simple life in his self-reliant farmhouse in the countryside, which both Captain America and Iron Man have a hard time to grasp the rationality of.

Another scene encouraging the audience to consumption is when the microscopic Ant-Man clings to Tony Stark in *Avengers: Endgame*, asking if he uses AXE body spray and Stark replies that he has a bottle in his desk for emergencies. This, of course, after they have exhaustively saved Earth from an impending apocalypse (01:20:00). This is however not the only scene in which international corporations are explicitly mentioned. In a scene from *Avengers: Infinity War* the Wakandan king T'Challa (Black Panther) decides to help the Avengers by letting them utilise the state-of-the-art technology his otherwise secluded nation has to offer, the general of his special forces, Okoye, states that inviting the Avengers was not what she had in mind when T'Challa previously implied that he wanted Wakanda to open up to the world – instead she imagined "The Olympics, maybe even a Starbucks" (01:31:37). The interesting aspect is not that Okoye mentions

Starbucks in the same context as the Olympics, it is that she implies that openness and liberty of a nation is synonymous with capitalism and international corporations and that it is desirable. However, corporate business is not only synonymous with openness and liberty. In the exposition of *Avengers: Endgame* when Iron Man drifts across the galaxy along with the android robot Nebula after the Avengers have lost their battle against Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*, he defines the distance to Earth in lightyears from the closest 7-Eleven (*Endgame* 00:07:00). In this sense corporate business is also referred to as a symbol for something desirable in this case, namely civilisation.

The idea to promote and emphasise the positive aspects of capitalism and consumerism refutes the position of deep ecology according to Garrard, since consumerism and capitalism is not synonymous with biocentric ecologism (19). Furthermore, using Garrard's definition of the cornucopian economist's position it encourages the spectators to consume products such as fossil fuelled sportscars which are axiomatically known for their negative effect on global warming. Combined with the fact that *Avengers: Endgame* sold five times as many tickets during its opening week as its predecessor, the third highest grossing film of all time: *Avengers: Infinity War*, one can draw the conclusion that the potential commercial value most definitely reach out to the masses (Michallon).

4.4.2 Animals

Regarding on-screen animals there are only a few examples in which they appear. Even though the combined video length of the films stretches over ten hours there are only an undignified number of four scenes in which non-anthropomorphic animals are included, that is if one counts pegasi as animals even though they are mythological creatures outside the realm of Marvel. One of these scenes containing animals is in the apex of the final crisis when people on the raising levitating city are evacuated in hovering rafts by

S.H.I.E.L.D in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Even though this vast flying rock is covering both urban and presumably wild areas, the Avengers save all the people in danger – and a domesticated dog. Hence, the dog gets its value and right to life by its instrumental value to the humans possessing it. The films implicitly favour speciesism since the bond to humans defines the value to humans (Singer 185). In another scene including animals in *Avengers: Endgame,* a rat accidentally strikes a button bringing Ant-Man back from the quantum dimension (00:22:00). Thus, ultimately saving the world since Ant-Man later evokes the idea of travelling in time back to when Thanos did not possess the power of the Infinity Stones. These three examples share two aspects; that all the animals in the scenes are products of the Anthropocene and that the animals' value is defined by their instrumental value to humans, which according to Garrard are values residing within the ethics of anthropocentrism (206-7).

Even though the main antagonist of the Avengers advocate biocentrism it does not necessarily imply that the films are anti-ecological. The films raise public awareness on matters such as climate-change and anthropogenic agency by merely addressing environmental issues such as Malthus' theory regarding the issues of geometrically increasing population and arithmetically increasing food production (4-6, 9). By this they create a more general discussion amongst its viewers who are likely to reflect on the ideas of Thanos, regardless of him being an antagonist or not.

4.5 Applying *Avengers* and Ecocriticism in the EFL-classroom

Children and youths tend to reflect the ideas of their legal guardians, thus their ideas are incused by the societal discourse. Since the discourse of society can be utterly polarised this polarisation can be manifested within classrooms as well. Sieglinde Grimm and Berbeli Wanning claim that ecocritical theory traditionally is perceived as grounded on

politically left-wing attitudes (514). Hence, the classroom dialogue regarding climate issues can be politically charged. In order to deal with this feasible problem of students feeling alienated by imposed attitudes, the teacher must obtain enough knowledge in areas not belonging in the field of ethics, such as anthropogenic agency on climate-change, pollution, invasive species et cetera. A second alternative would be to work interdisciplinary with a teacher in any of the natural sciences in order to supply the students with a forum suitable to discuss such issues. Thus, the teaching sequence would incorporate the aim to let the students engage with interdisciplinary areas related to their studies (Orr 90).

However, it may be argued that the politically neutral and unbiased position of the teacher is sacrificed by simply addressing these issues as a foundation of a teaching sequence. This fear is shared with Grimm and Wanning who call for a neutral approach when dealing with any critical theory in the classroom by creating open discussions and accepting counter-environmental ideas (514-15). Nevertheless, the curriculum is hardly politically unbiased since it necessitates teachers to follow its common principles – including vouching for environmental perspectives and sustainability (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. *Curriculum* 5-8). Therefore, it lies within the obligations of all pedagogical staff in the Swedish system to bring ecology into the classroom in one way or the other. The syllabus for English 7 also implies that existential issues, political conditions, opinions, ideas and feelings ought to be aspects of the classroom discourse (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. *English* 11). Hence, ecocriticism is an excellent tool to cover a large extent of the curricular documents in a single teaching sequence, although teachers must be conscious and alert not to initiate a commotion within the class.

Throughout my years as an uncertified teacher I have not encountered a fictional antagonist creating such a contentious discussion among my students as Thanos. Partially due to the wide-ranging and the popularity of the films, but also since they somehow can

sympathise with the issues underneath his motives. Other antagonists in the sequel, such as Loki, did not engage my students in the same discussions, perhaps due to his deceitfulness and treachery towards his own kin. Thanos' idealistic and unbiased measures may seem fractionally compelling to students seeking their own environmental identity – which makes this material essential to discuss in a controlled environment. Another issue which might be potentially loaded is the discussion of eco-fascism and the question of invasive species. Students with racist tendencies can take this opportunity to express their ideas within the classroom legitimately and masked within the field of ecocriticism.

Grimm and Wanning claim that the application of ecocritical concepts on teaching also serves a purpose of consciousness raising for the students and to counter ideas of materialism, over-consumption and exploitation of natural resources (514). Hence, it is also suitable to scrutinise the ideas of Iron Man and juxtapose them with shallow ecology and the cornucopian economists' position.

The total length of the combined films of the study is fairly vast, adding up to over ten hours, and thus it cannot be used in its entirety unless the students are handed the necessary tools to analyse the films outside the frame of the lesson hours. If the teacher would prefer to watch the films excerpts of certain scenes in which the characters directly or indirectly address environmental issues this would be preferable lesson material. Scenes such as when Iron Man creates a self-reliant and sustainable energy source powering up the Stark Tower in *Marvel's The Avengers*; when Gamora describes Thanos' motives in *Avengers: Infinity War*; or when Thanos retreats to his cottage on flourishing home planet and explains that he did not desire to use his omnipotent power further in *Avengers: Endgame*, could be used in this abbreviated sense amongst others.

The Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school also states that the students' education ought to include four perspectives; the ethical, environmental,

international and the historical. When using *The Avengers* the teacher is able to incorporate all perspectives depending on the extent of the teaching sequence (Natl. Ag. For Ed. *Curriculum* 6). The ethical perspective is naturally incorporated through discussions regarding the Anthropocene and the ethical models of the characters. The international and environmental perspective are what this thesis has set out to highlight – first by illuminating how the chosen media covers the global population through threats targeted towards all of humanity, and then through discussions regarding the environmental issues addressed by various characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In order to expand on the environmental perspective, the teacher can bring up issues regarding the Anthropocene to dive further into the philosophical questions dealt by the films. The historical perspective is the only one not incorporated explicitly in the films. However, to fully comprehend the concepts of biocentrism and anthropocentrism the students need to get a brief historical background on the origin of human agency in relation to climate-change. Furthermore, the Swedish Curriculum for upper secondary school states that:

> It is the responsibility of the school that all individual students: . . . can use non-fiction, fiction and other forms of culture as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure, . . . have the ability to critically examine and assess what they see, hear and read in order to be able to discuss and take a view on different issues concerning life and values, . . . (Natl. Ag. For Ed. *Curriculum* 8-9)

This implies that students ought to engage and critically examine fiction and, for example, investigate values and ideas present in fictional characters. Hence, the theoretical framework applied on the Avengers-films in this study is also highly relevant for students in the EFL-classroom in Swedish upper secondary school.

5 Conclusion

As previously mentioned there are no absolutes in deducing characters' or individuals'
philosophical alignments regarding their perspectives on nature's function in
relationship to humanity.

However, it is clear that the main antagonist, Thanos, advocates a more
biocentric perspective whereas the Iron Man and the Avengers represent a more
anthropocentric position. But there are some ideas personified by Thanos that can seem
quite problematic from a deep ecological perspective, and that is his implied view on
biodiversity. Another interesting aspect of the analysis was that Ant-Man represented
some ecological values, but due to his status among the other Avengers he only
becomes appreciated for his immaturity and frolicking. This arguably makes him less
ideologically impactful than a character such as Iron Man, who on the other hand
represents both cornucopian and environmentalist ideas.

The possible applicability of the films in connection with the ecocritical
perspective could perhaps most easily be described to fit like a glove. The immense
popularity of the films may pave way for a possible assimilation in most contemporary
classes, although the depth of the ecocritical theory may seem too abstract for the
average lower secondary school students.

Throughout this degree project it became apparent that Thanos also was a
eulogy to the personification of death in Greek mythology. Hence, it would be
enthralling to scrutinise these possible parallels. A second idea for future research is to
conduct a study rooted in gender theory on *Avengers: Endgame*. This seems interesting
since some of the scenes portrayed unsubtly portrayed all heroines are assembled to
combat Thanos. Thus, research on how effective this portrayal actual is, by examining
gender equality in the film, would be especially compelling. Furthermore, in the end of
Avengers: Endgame Captain America is passing on his legacy to the African-American

character Falcon. This is particularly thought-provoking due to that Steve Rogers according to the MCU lore passes his legacy to Bucky Barnes, who is also present in the same scene (02:47:00). Hence, it would also be interesting to investigate the representation of ethnic minorities in *Avengers: Endgame*. If one is interested in expanding on the research conducted in this essay, some suggestions would be to either make a historiographical comparison regarding the philosophical ideas of Thanos and Iron Man in early comic books, or applying virtually the same theoretical framework on other MCU-films or series to map out a continuum or possible discrepancies to the analysis of this essay.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Chronological order of the Marvel Cinematic Universe narrative

> **Marvel *Avengers* films**
> Marvel films
> Marvel series (season, episode)

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)
Marvel's Agent Carter, s1
Marvel's Agent Carter, s2
Iron Man (2008)
The Incredible Hulk (2008)
Iron Man 2 (2010)
Thor (2011)
***Avengers* (2012)**
Iron Man 3 (2013)
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s1e1-s1e7
Thor: The Dark World (2013)
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s1e8-s1e16
Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s1e17-s1e22
Guardians of the Galaxy (2014)
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s2e1-s2e19
Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 (2017)
Marvel's Daredevil, s1
***Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015)**
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s2e20-s2e22
Ant-Man (2015)
Marvel's Jessica Jones, s1
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s3e1-s3e10
Marvel's Daredevil, s2
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s3e11-s3e19
Marvel's Luke Cage, s1
Marvel's Iron Fist, s1
Captain America: Civil War (2016)
Marvel's Cloak and Dagger, s1
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s3e20-s3e22
Black Panther (2018)
Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., s4
Marvel's The Defenders, s1
Marvel's Runaways, s1
Marvel's The Punisher, s1
Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)
Marvel's Inhumans, s1
Marvel's Jessica Jones, s2
Marvel's Luke Cage, s2
Doctor Strange (2016)
Marvel's Runaways, s2

Marvel's Iron Fist, s2
Marvel's Daredevil, s3
Ant-Man and the Wasp (2018)
Captain Marvel (2019)
Thor: Ragnarök (2017)
<u>Avengers: Infinity War (2018)</u>
<u>Avengers: Endgame (2019)</u>
Spider-Man: Far from Home (2019)

Appendix B: Glossary

Anthropocentrism: The idea that the world is centred around humankind which is meant to dominate other non-human beings

Anthropogenic: Caused by humans

Anthropocene: A geological time period which dates from the origins of the Industrial Revolution up to current time.

Biocentrism: The antonym to *anthropocentrism*

Biodiversity: The value of multipluralism within the ecosystems

Biospherical egalitarianism: The idea that humans and other creatures have an equal claim to life.

Crisis: Or *Climax* is the event a film ultimately paves way for. In *Avengers: Endgame* the crisis is the final battle with Thanos.

Eco-fascism: A pejorative term for deep ecologists

Ecologism: See *deep ecology*

Environmentalism: Also known as "shallow ecology". An anthropocentric recognition of climate issues, although the ones belonging to this position desire to make small climate-friendly changes which do not sacrifice their own living standards.

Exposition: The initial presentation of characters and main issue which a film revolves around.

Deep ecology: A biocentric ethic desiring to reshape the world to favour the climate and the ecosystems

Dénouement: The final resolution of the plot of a drama or novel

Homeostasis: A constant and stable balance between humans and natural resources

Malthusianism: Advocating the policies explained and discussed by Thomas Robert Malthus

Mutually Assured Destruction: Theory revolving superpowers use of nuclear weapons.

Shallow ecology: See *environmentalism*

Appendix C: Jonathan Porritt's taxonomy (in Brereton 26-28)
Unapplied dichotomy
Applied dichotomy

The Politics of Industrialism	The Politics of Ecology
a deterministic view of future	flexibility & personal
aggressive individualism	co-operative/communitarian
materialism	**move towards the spiritual**
divisive/reductive	holistic synthesis
anthropocentrism	**biocentrism**
rationality	intuition and understanding
outer-directed motivation	inner directed motivation
patriarchal values	post-patriarchal, feminist
institutionalised violence	non-violence
economic growth and GNP	**sustainable and quality**
production for exchange	**production for use**
high income differentials	low income differentials
free market economy	**local production**
ever expanding trade	**self reliance**
demand stimulation	voluntary simplicity
employment as a means to an end	work as an end in itself
capital intensive production	labour intensive production
technological fix	**discriminating technology**
centralised economies of scale	decentralised human scale
hierarchal structure	non-hierarchal
dependence on experts	participative involvement
representative democracy	direct democracy
emphasis on law and order	libertarianism
sovereignty of nation state	internationalism and global
domination over nature	**harmony with nature**
environmentalism	ecology
environment managed as resource	**resource – finite**
nuclear power	**renewable sources of energy**
high energy/high consumption	low energy/ low consumption

Appendix D: Andrew Heywood's "Tensions Within Green Ideology" (251)

'Shallow' ecology	'Deep' ecology
environmentalism	ecologism
'light' anthropocentrism	ecocentrism
science	mysticism
humankind	nature
limited holism	radical holism
instrumental value	value-in-nature
modified humanism	biocentric equality
animal welfare	animal rights
sustainable growth	anti-growth
personal development	ecological consciousness

Appendix E: Character alter egos

Tony Stark – Iron Man
Steve Rogers – Captain America
Bruce Banner – Hulk
Natasha Romanoff – Black Widow
Wanda Maximoff – Scarlet Witch
Peter Parker – Spider Man
Peter Quill – Star-Lord
T'Challa – Black Panther
Carol Danvers – Captain Marvel
Scott Lang – Ant-Man
Sam Wilson – Falcon
James Rhodes – War Machine
Bucky Barnes – Winter Soldier