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The (non)democratic superhero?

A study of the reproduction of democratic society in character narratives in superhero films.

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ABSTRACT

This study uses political philosophy to understand how democracy is communicated as transmutating or transitioning in superhero narratives. The study combines a conflict-based conceptualisation of democracy with Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to discuss the characters' actions in relation to their respective society. The analysis is conducted through a narrative analysis, using the hero's journey as a tool to define the material from the narratives of a hero, a villain, a hero-turned-villain, a villain-turned-hero, and an antihero.

The analysis shows that spaces can be created within a democracy where other political ideals are produced, called pockets of alternate ideals. Also, the conditions of the characters' actions influence how they can emerge as heroes or villains, which in turn influence how the characters produce or reproduce their societies. The discussion finds that the superhero narratives suggest that a strong democratic society needs a common enemy to fight, as the focus on the outside enemy rallies the people to mitigate the conflicts within society. To conclude, the point of democracy is that the people have the power, meaning that they have the responsibility to be active citizens who continue to reproduce democracy, as portrayed by the hero narrative.

Keywords: Democracy, Popular culture, Superhero, Agency, Structuration

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1. Introduction

The survival of democracy depends on the people's continuous support and practice of it (Dahl, 1998) since democracy is a constant process that can never reach a static endpoint (Ekman et al., 2014). This means that the people must be continuously taught how to practice democracy for it to survive, an especially urgent matter considering that the worldwide sustainability goals names democracy as essential for creating a sustainable world (United Nations, 2015). So, if people do not learn how to sustain democratic societies, it will be difficult to achieve the global sustainability goals.

Popular culture is one of the many platforms where people can learn how to discuss and practice democracy in a casual setting. Liesbet Van Zoonen has argued both that narratives in popular culture contribute to the audience's political understanding in a personalised manner (2000) and that fandoms created by popular culture act in similar ways as political constituencies (2004). Moreover, entertaining popular culture narratives offer a space for social teachings through what Matthew Pustz (2012) calls *casual learning*. In addition to being entertainment, stories function as tools for learning about social issues by placing them in a social context (Pustz, 2012, pp. 3–4). Hence, popular culture and the subsequential fandoms offer a space to learn how to practice democracy, as well as to deliberate political understanding and democratic citizenship.

Political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2000) has argued that democracy is dynamic and constantly changing as it is based on a conflict between oppositions. A democratic society can therefore either evolve while remaining a democracy (transmutate[1]) or it can transform into something else (transition) based on who prevails in the conflicts. And, as the superhero narrative evolves its characters through the conflict between heroes and villains, the portrayals in these narratives can be fruitful to discuss transformational democracy. The superhero narrative has been criticised for its nondemocratic portrayal of the salvation of society, partly because the narrative defends the status quo and dismisses alternative courses of development for society (*e.g.* Dittmer, 2007; Muñoz-González, 2017), and partly because it justifies the hero's illegal actions (*e.g.* Maruo-Schröder, 2018; Phillips, 2010). However, these criticisms of the narrative only used democracy as a concept to support their arguments regarding geopolitics

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[1] The term *transmutating* is based on Anthony Giddens' (1984) idea of a mutating society in structuration theory, meaning that a society can transform while still reinforcing its fundamental structures.

and justice and have not focused on democracy itself. Given that previous research has not centred around democracy, despite popular culture being a platform to learn about democracy and the popularity of the superhero narrative[2], it is important to analyse the portrayal of democracy in such narratives to see how democracy is practiced by the characters.

Since superhero narratives are inter- and hypertextual with characters travelling across cinematic universes, the character narratives become complex and do not always adhere to the binaries of hero and villain – the expanding universes create spaces for heroes turning into villains, villains turning into heroes and antiheroes. These transformative narratives complicate the arguments in previous research which deem the superhero narratives as nondemocratic, because of the defence of the status quo and the heroes' illegal methods, as the characters who act nondemocratically in one film can redeem those actions in a later film. Such transformative character narratives across cinematic universes convey that the characters are not static but can transform through how they act in relation to their society, making the moments when they decide to act an interesting point of analysis.

Hence, it is crucial to analyse how characters choose to act based on how they interact with the surrounding society since it will reveal how democratic processes and democracy as a political ideal are portrayed in the superhero genre. In turn, this contributes to the understanding of how democracy is communicated through popular culture, with an additional contribution to popular culture studies as it places democracy in the centre of the research, compared to previous studies which only used democracy as a concept to argue that superheroes are negative for the understanding of society.

In the following chapter, the character types used in this study are defined. Then, the aim and research questions are presented, followed by the literature review of the superhero narratives and the portrayal of society in the superhero genre. The fifth chapter explains the theoretical framework of the study and afterward the method and material are presented. The first three research questions are answered in the analysis before the fourth question is answered in the discussion where limits to the study and suggestions for future research are also presented. Conclusions of the study are drawn in the final chapter of the thesis.

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[2] The superhero genre is one of the most popular according to the films' grosses on Box Office Mojo and the large fan communities including fans of the films, the comic books, and specific characters.

2. Conceptual background

The characters in this study will be considered heroes or villains in the superhero genre, and not superheroes or supervillains. This distinction is made since characters in the superhero genre do not necessarily exhibit superpowers, while still acting as heroes or villains in the narratives. The characters can also act in an environment where the majority exhibit superpowers, which means that their superpower is not the trait that makes the character a hero or a villain but how they use their power.

2.1 Character definitions

The opposition in a narrative is characterised by the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. The protagonist is commonly the *hero*, the character which the audience is supposed to root for as they are portrayed as acting in the best interest of society (Ballon, 2004). However, the protagonist is not always the conventionally good hero (Hoxter, 2015), introducing the *antihero*. The antihero in this study is also the protagonist of their story but unlike the hero, they are not portrayed as conventionally good.

The protagonist's quest to reach their goal of the good of society is interrupted by *the villain*, an opposing force who is actively working against the goals of the hero (Hoxter, 2015). The villain contrasts the hero while matching the hero in power (Ballon, 2004), which is what serves as the definition of the villain also in this study. However, the villain cannot be redeemed by the end of their narrative, as the character could then be a villain transitioning into a hero.

The *villain-turned-hero* is a character who is initially presented and acting as a villain but who ends up acting as a hero through the narrative. The *hero-turned-villain* is a character who is initially presented and acting as a hero but through the narrative changes into a villain. Because these characters' narratives cause them to change into something new, they are considered transitioning characters. Meanwhile, the hero, antihero, and villain are the transmutating characters since their narratives develop them while they remain within their respective character types.

3. Aim and research questions

This study aims to understand how democracy is communicated in superhero narratives as transmutating or transitioning. It will use political philosophy to explore democracy in the character narratives of a hero, a villain, a hero-turned-villain, a villain-turned-hero, and an antihero in the superhero genre and the interaction between these characters and their surrounding society. The aim will be fulfilled by asking these research questions (RQs):

> *RQ1*: How are the political ideals portrayed as conditioning the characters' actions in their narratives?
> *RQ2*: How are society's structures portrayed as influencing the characters' actions during their moments of decision?
> *RQ3*: How do the characters produce and reproduce democracy, or other political ideals, through their actions?
> *RQ4*: How is a strong democratic society portrayed in the narratives?

These questions will give answers to how democracy itself is portrayed in the superhero genre instead of only using democracy as an argument as to why the superhero genre should be considered as portraying society negatively. Thereby, these questions are derived from the gap found by reviewing previous literature on the topic, the literature review is presented in depth in the following chapter.

4. Literature review

The superhero genre has been studied within social studies from perspectives of gender and race regarding injustice and representation (e.g. Aman, 2022; Clark & Jacobs Henderson, 2019; Voelker-Morris & Voelker-Morris, 2014). Another focus has been on the depiction of society, mainly concerning security, law, and justice. A specific area of interest regards the imagined difference between justice and procedural law, as shown by Sharp (2010), which means that the democratic institutions of law do not live up to their promise of justice. Also, Phillips and Strobl's (2006) often-cited study of superhero narratives introduced several themes subsequently studied – such as the defence of the status quo, extralegality of the hero, retribution as justice, and deathworthiness of villains, all of which are interesting when considering the democratic values of equality, power, and citizenship.

Superhero narratives in comic books and superhero films have both been researched thoroughly. The Batman film trilogy by Christopher Nolan, especially *The Dark Knight*, is heavily featured because of its post-9/11 depiction of the hero-versus-villain narrative. Though this narrative, and the general superhero comic book and film production, is set mostly in the United States, there are those arguing that the superhero characters are transcultural (Brillon, 2021; Żaglewski, 2021), which is evident in how Marvel Comics and DC Comics have borrowed characters from Nordic, Egyptian, and Greek mythology. Thus, the superhero genre is part of a larger web of stories that has taught the people lessons on how to understand their society for centuries. The following sections will dive deeper into research about the defence of the status quo (4.1), how superhero narratives interact with politics (4.2), the characters' extralegal activities (4.3), and the depiction of the people (4.4), the hero (4.5), and the villain (4.6).

4.1 The superhero as the defender of the status quo

While the superhero narrative can offer counter-hegemonic perspectives, the stories usually end up defending the status quo through the victory of the hero (Dittmer, 2005; Dittmer, 2007; Muñoz-González, 2017; Phillips & Strobl, 2006). The prevalent defence of the status quo in the superhero genre is problematic when considering the democratic process, as it contradicts the idea of constant transformation in favour of a static society. Nonetheless, this research presumes the hero and villain in the superhero genre to be static characters, while

there are also characters in the genre exhibiting transformational attributes complicating the idea of defender of the status quo.

Because the superhero narrative is a recurring one, with a new villain emerging with every new narrative, the image of the defender of the status quo becomes more nuanced. Both Goodrum (2015) and Nichols (2011) argue that the never-ending conflict between the hero and the villain suggests that stability breeds instability – the hero can never truly defeat all opponents because the status quo will always be challenged by new threats. Nichols (2011) adds that the hero and the villain are mutually responsible for each other's creation. This brings an interesting perspective as democracy should continuously foster differences of opinion and allow for the continuing conflict between them, suggesting that the superhero narrative is more democratic than believed at first glance. Because while the hero preserves some ideas through their victory, the narratives still allow the conflict to grow and unfold.

The villain challenging the hero could therefore be seen as portraying that even the most stable society can be challenged. Though the hero-villain conflict becomes more complicated when it is not a traditional hero fighting a traditional villain. Brown (2021) analyses the film *Joker* from 2019 in which the villain the Joker is the protagonist and the narrative follows his fight and win against the status quo, showing that the hero-villain relationship could be about a character fighting the surrounding social structures. Similarly, Gray (2010) states that *V for Vendetta* from the early 1980s offers a counter-hegemonic perspective challenging contemporary Thatcherism. Donovan Purcell (2021) instead explains how comic book narratives were used during the Reagan presidency as political critique. Showing not only how the characters can challenge the fictional society by protesting the status quo, as in *Joker,* but also how the narratives themselves can constitute political protest against the status quo in the real-world society.

4.2 Superheroes entertaining the political

The characters of superhero narratives, and the narratives themselves, have been used by fans as well as journalists to understand current events and create political resistance. Garrett (2014) and Wessel and Martinez (2015) explore how characters from the superhero genre are applied to real-world politics to communicate opinions about politicians and their ideologies. Garrett (2014) shows how the hero and villain characters were associated with Chinese

political figures to visualise resistance toward the Chinese regime in Hong Kong. Wessel and Martinez (2015) argue that political shifts need to be analysed alongside cultural shifts, as they explore how a networked meaning of proper citizenship developed through the creation of the Obama-Joker, a merger between the then-presidential candidate and later president of the United States Barack Obama and the villain character the Joker. So, characters in the superhero genre are also used to understand politics in the real world, which suggests that the characters also create a meaning of how democracy is understood.

Furthermore, the narratives in the superhero genre are used by fans to understand and discuss political issues, ideology, and national identity. Stevens (2011) analyses fan letters discussing storylines published in the Marvel comic books to see how the audience uses the narratives to make sense of current events. This also indicates how people from different ideological perspectives consider their opponents as a faceless, homogeneous group. This shows how well-integrated fictional superhero narratives are with how the audience understands real-world political opponents and what their conflict is about.

The superhero narrative is further embedded into real-world political struggle when journalistic media coverage picks up the events in comic books to discuss their meaning. Dittmer (2012) analyses the real-world media coverage of Captain America's assassination in the comic book storyline *Civil War* which ran 2006–2007. The journalists and other commentators in the media coverage all agreed that Captain America, and thus also his death, symbolised the United States and its politics, but there was no consensus regarding what the character and the event represented. In sum, the characters and events in the superhero genre are well integrated with how the audience understands politics in the real world. While there is no agreement on what the specific events represent, the superhero narratives can offer a platform where the audience can explore and deliberate politics and democracy.

4.3 Justice and the exceptional superhero

Scholars have taken interest in how conflicts are solved in the superhero narrative from a law and justice perspective, and one of the major contributors to this field is Jason Bainbridge. He argues that in the superhero genre the law is portrayed as wanting to find someone guilty, while the hero is portrayed as being the one seeking justice (Bainbridge, 2007). In a later article, he argues that because the law fails to achieve justice the hero is given space to act

extralegally, supplementing the law (Bainbridge, 2015). However, he only reads the relation between the hero and the law through how the villain is defeated, and not through how the characters act and interact with society in general.

The superhero genre is also criticised for having a narrative where the ends justify the means, as the hero is allowed to act extralegally with the promise of achieving safety for the people (Adams et al., 2020; Bainbridge, 2015; Gavaler, 2016; Halevy & Cooper, 2016; Maruo-Schröder, 2018). This is questioned from the law and justice perspective because the heroes undermine the society they claim to protect (Bainbridge, 2017). Through a historical analysis Gavaler (2016) shows how the superhero genre has always used this narrative, and thereby the genre has promoted authoritarian rule. The sole ability to provide justice, and the extralegal means to do so, is what gives the hero the exceptional status in the superhero genre, which would make the character inherently superior to others in society and therefore nondemocratic concerning equality.

Bainbridge (2017) states that the hero and villain's ability to declare a state of exception is what makes them *super*. Additionally, Curtis (2019) argues that because declaring a state of exception is legal, the hero can act both inside and outside the law simultaneously and should therefore not be considered as acting beyond the law. Peters (2015) offers another interesting perspective to the matter, arguing that the heroes are not the ones declaring a state of exception, just those who respond to it. Thus, he argues, more focus should be on exploring who declares the state of exception in the superhero genre. In democracies, this sovereignty should be granted by the people, which could entail that the people are more visible in the superhero genre than expected.

4.4 The role of the people in the superhero narratives

Gadon (2013) has previously raised concerns regarding how superhero characters affect the people in their society. He argues that while an overprotective hero limits the people's ability to develop self-defence, the hero should be considered equally responsible for the harm caused by not using their power to protect the people as the hero is for the harm caused by their power. This leads to a balancing act of being compassionate but not overprotective (Gadon, 2013). While Gadon's perspective is one of morality, the analysis relates to the issue

of a democratic state, as he points to the risks of moving the conflict too far away from the people which would limit their agency in favour of the superpowered character's agency.

The characters in the superhero genre exhibit varying degrees of superpowers, which is an element that puts democratic values of equality into question as some characters are portrayed as inherently superior to others. However, according to Barringer (2020), this does not have to be an issue. She argues that the film *Wonder Woman* from 2017 portrays an unusually democratic superhero narrative, as it grants the people without superpowers the agency to join the fight against the villain with whatever means they have available. Thus, superhero narratives are not necessarily about which characters have the superpowers to make a change, but about which characters choose to fight and what resources they have available to do so.

Continuing on the issue of sovereignty, Curtis (2017) uses the comic book storyline *Secret Wars* from 2015–2016 to explore the risk of self-suspension of the people's constitutive power. He argues that while the characters show how a revolutionary fight can be fought to create a democratic state, the state can then enforce laws to render the same revolutionary acts illegal. This would entail that while the characters can show the people as having power, the consequences of that power could be that the power is taken away from the people.

As the previous sections have shown, the characters of the superhero genre have been criticised for acting as the sole protectors of society outside the democratic system, making them unreachable to the people. However, those analyses have all assumed that the characters represent leaders or social institutions of democracy, which misses part of the complexity of democracy as the characters could be symbols of the people or act against a nondemocratic society. Though Thomas Giddens (2015) suggests that the hero in the superhero genre is someone who steps in to resist when society fails to protect the people. His idea contrasts the previous studies as it puts the hero character in the role of protesting against a failing state rather than enforcing their own will on the people. Additionally, Růžička (2010) suggests that the hero in the contemporary superhero genre is finding themself struggling in a society they do not agree with, making it interesting to see how the characters interact with the society around them and what causes them to act.

4.5 The hero in the superhero genre

While this study will consider the hero to be the protagonist acting in favour of society (*cf.* 2.1), others have further explored how the hero is portrayed in the superhero genre. Dudas (2021) and Greene (2018) argue that it is mainly the ideology that differentiates the hero from the villain. Johnson (2014), Yogerst (2017), and Manninen (2018) argue that a hero character is defined by choosing to use their powers for a good cause, unlike the villain. Robichaud (2005) adds to the discussion that a person does not have to choose to be a hero just because they possess superpowers, but if the person decides to be a hero it entails responsibilities. The hero and the villain are from this point of view not inherently different, but they are set apart by how they use their agency. However, they do not expand on what constrains or enables the characters to choose to be good or evil.

Peters (2012) argues that because the good hero is usually portrayed in relation to the evil villain, it is difficult to understand goodness in and of itself. But if the choices of the characters were analysed further, it could contribute to knowledge on what makes the character a hero or not. Donovan and Richardson (2012) further the discussion by adding that there is more to being a hero than just looking good through their analysis of the Dark Avengers. The Dark Avengers are a team put together by Norman Osborn for his personal gain and though they still appear as heroes in society, the real Avengers refuse to join them. This emphasises the need for heroes to be good to be defined as heroes and not just appear good to the people. Phillips (2010) offers a slightly different view as she argues that the people in *The Dark Knight* film support Batman as long as they perceive him as successful, but condemn him as soon as they believe he is unsuccessful in keeping them safe – though this does not have to oppose democracy, as it could be interpreted as the people having the power to replace their leaders. However, this perspective is not explored in her study.

Robichaud (2012) explores the moral obligations of Spider-Man when he has in some way caused a person to become a villain. He concludes that if the hero has caused someone to become a villain, they should also reform the villain after the capture. However, he notes that a person cannot use the actions of a hero character as an excuse to purposefully become a villain. This shows the interconnection between the characters in the superhero narrative and their surroundings and that they can influence each other's development but does not explore in which situations this occurs.

Belor and Peters (2020) discuss *The Punisher* and the difference between hero and antihero in the superhero genre. The difference, according to them, is that the hero is sanctioned by society to act beyond the law, while the similar actions of the antihero are without permission. This means that there are different systems and structures in place enabling or constraining the characters' use of their agency causing them to emerge as heroes, antiheroes, or villains.

4.6 The villain in the superhero genre

While society's heroes are not easily defined without the contrasting villains, research argues that the villain has more clear markers of evil in superhero narratives. Both Fennell (2012) and Lockhart (2018) explain how the deformity of the villain and placement of the character outside the norm are signs of how punishment is understood as violence. Fennell (2012) further states that the deformity of the villain links the villain to criminality, making it clear to the audience who the villain is and that the character deserves the impending punishment. In addition, Lockhart (2018) finds it interesting how the villains sometimes exhibit mental issues, since the democratic justice system usually protects those unable to control their actions. The placement of the villain outside the norm in this manner is also interesting because it makes the villain more easily identifiable than the hero, so it is clear who is the villain even when it is unclear who is a hero.

Other studies analyse the function of the villain character in the superhero narrative. Powell (2012) discusses Norman Osborn[3] as a cautionary tale, Osborn knowingly endangers society so he can save it and thus be considered a hero. Because of this, the heroes criticise their society for enabling Osborn to rise to power (Powell, 2012). This is an interesting point since it is made explicit that social institutions have failed in dealing with the villain. Donovan and Richardson (2013) instead analyse the villain Lex Luthor who has legitimate concerns about Superman's exceptional status in their society, however, Luthor has also made himself into a similar object of worship. This indicates that both the hero and villain fill the function of raising concerns about each other, which opponents in a democracy should be able to do. Bainbridge (2019) argues that villains are not just obstacles for the hero, but that they represent larger societal fears that the social institutions fail to deal with. However, neither Bainbridge nor the others develop further how the characters interact with each other and their

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[3] Norman Osborn is a villain in the Marvel Comics and a notable enemy of Spider-Man.

surroundings or how the villains and heroes can emerge in society in different or similar ways.

4.7 Contribution to the field

While it is not a new idea to use the superhero narrative to analyse social issues, the topics of interest have previously been geared towards how social institutions and the salvation of society are portrayed. The characters are presumed to act in a democratic setting, which leads to the interpretation that the characters' actions are nondemocratic or counterdemocratic. This normative understanding of the superhero narrative produces a gap as democracy itself is left out of the analysis but is nevertheless used as an argument to prove the narratives and characters' nondemocratic nature. This study will fill that research gap from two main angles: (1) from the understanding of the depiction of society; and (2) from the depiction of the characters. The study will begin by applying a perspective of political philosophy to analyse democracy in character narratives in the superhero genre. The analysis covers characters' actions and their conditions and outcomes, knowing these are not always democratic. It will also consider how democracy is produced and reproduced differently depending on the character type.

Changing the perspective on the superhero narrative will provide new insights into what constitutes a hero or a villain, as it will contribute to knowledge on how the characters emerge or change into their character types based on their interactions with their surroundings. As superhero narratives are expanding and linked together, the previous focus on specific film narratives becomes too exclusive. One character's actions can now have consequences across several films. The expansion of the narratives has also entailed ambiguous characters which are not as easily definable as heroes or villains, by introducing antiheroes and characters transitioning from one character type to another. Still, this transitioning ability of the characters has not been explored until now. By including this perspective, this study will generate knowledge on how the characters emerge as their character type as well as their different opportunities to become either heroes or villains.

5. Theory

The study's aim, to understand how democracy is communicated as transmutating or transitioning in superhero narratives, is reached through employing a theoretical framework that combines democracy and structuration theory. Democracy theory (5.1) will reveal how the characters practice democracy and when they are practicing something other than democracy. Structuration theory (5.2) is used to understand the different aspects of the characters' actions in relation to the surrounding society. Jointly, these theories can reveal how democracy is produced and reproduced through the characters' interaction with their surroundings in the superhero genre.

5.1 Democracy

As previously mentioned, the narratives in the superhero genre are focused on the conflict between opposites. The characters' opposition of each other and their conflict is what causes them to transition or transmutate in the narratives. Opposition and difference of opinion are also what transform democracy, therefore this study employs a framework of democracy that centres on conflict, which Mouffe's (2000) agnostic theory of democracy does. She criticises the consensus approach in democratic thinking, arguing that reaching consensus entails the production of hegemonic structures which will always lead to the exclusion of alternative ideas. Another political theorist, Robert Dahl, agrees by stating that democracy is defined by conflict rather than harmony (1989, p. 19). Because democracy and the superhero narrative are both based on conflict, the superhero narrative can be used to discuss democracy as transitioning or transmutating.

Mouffe (2000) emphasises the moments of decision in democracy, which are the points where the direction of democracy is decided, which establish the structures of hegemony. Moreover, character narratives consist of turning points in which the characters can change the course of their narrative. The moments of decision for the characters will therefore be considered as the turning points in which they act to change the course of their narrative. During these moments of decision, the characters can either reproduce the conditions of their society or change them depending on how and if they practice democracy. To understand how the characters practice democracy, or something else, the portrayal of power (5.1.1), opportunity of choice (5.1.2),

and acting (5.1.3) will be explored.

5.1.1 Power

It is common within the superhero genre that the hero and the villain are familiar with each other; often the relationship is based on how the characters cause each other to emerge as heroes or villains. But the characters are also surrounded by others who are not their opponents, for example, love interests, family, friends, and representatives of social institutions. All of these relationships have the potential to influence the characters' actions, which means that power over a character's actions lies in their relationships. Similarly, Mouffe (2000) considers power as something based on social relationships, such as those relationships between the characters. So, by understanding who or what a character is influenced by during a moment of decision it will be revealed whose power is legitimised through the character's action. If the characters are influenced by democratic institutions or the desires of the people, the power is reproduced as democratic.

Analysing who is given power will reveal how the characters identify themselves in relation to their surroundings, as power relations are constitutive of identity (Mouffe, 2000). Thus, whose instruction or advice the characters choose to obey or disobey reveals how the characters emerge as either heroes or villains. But it is also important to understand how they relate to the opposing power because how the opponents are constructed is an important part of democracy. In democracies, opponents should not be considered as enemies to be destroyed but as opponents with ideas that need to be combatted (Mouffe, 2000). Adding this perspective will reveal when the relationship between the characters and their surroundings is democratic or not. Because someone who is aiming to destroy their opponents cannot be considered as aligning with democratic power, as opposing opinions must exist and be given room to be discussed in a democracy (Mouffe, 2000).

5.1.2 Opportunity of choice

As discussed in the literature review, the superhero genre has been considered nondemocratic based on the exceptionality of the hero and the helplessness of the people (4.3; 4.4). This portrayal would indeed be nondemocratic as it offers an unequal opportunity to engage in society, which is why these opportunities will be included in the analysis. Dahl (1989) argues

that democracy should be based on equal and adequate opportunities of choice, meaning that a character's status as a hero or a villain should not automatically give them a greater opportunity of choice. Instead, the characters should make sure that their actions result in producing or reproducing adequate opportunities of choice for everyone affected by the situation. Dahl (1989) presents different aspects of the opportunity of choice which should all be accounted for in a democracy (pp. 108–113), these aspects will be used as a base for analysing the structures of opportunity of choice in the character narratives to see who is granted agency and why. Dahl's framework of opportunity of choice has been adapted for this study as follows:

- *Expression of opinion*: All characters surrounding the situation have an opportunity to express their opinion regarding the situation; alternatively, it is made clear in other ways through the film narrative what the desires of the surrounding characters are.
- *Control over the agenda*: The characters who are affected by a situation have equal control over how it is dealt with, and decide which situations require a violent response. The majority's interest guides which issues are fought for.
- *Equality*: All characters' lives are considered equal, regardless of position in society.
- *Individual's best interest*: The characters can explore their choices and act in the way which best serves their interests.

The opportunities of choice are revealed through what enables or constrains the character's actions in the moments of decision. Additionally, depending on how the characters act in the moment of decision, their actions can result in either constraining or enabling the opportunity of choice for themselves and others in the future. Thus, opportunity of choice is both a condition and an outcome of how the characters choose to act in their moments of decision.

5.1.3 Acting

While power and opportunities of choice constitute conditions and outcomes of the moments of decision, it is the character's actions that determine if the conditions are reproduced in the outcomes. How the characters choose to act is essentially what influences their overall journey of transformation, either transitioning or transmutating, and thus also how democracy is communicated through the narratives.

To understand how the characters choose to act in the moments of decision, the study will draw upon Ekman and Amnå's (2012) typology of political participation. Their typology suggests that participation can be both manifest and latent, and non-participation can be divided into active and passive forms (p. 295). Though their typology is not intended to analyse fictional characters, the model offers a nuanced way of analysing how characters act and which actions they promote in others. Based on Ekman and Amnå's (2012) ideas, there will be a division of participation and non-participation, however, adapted to how characters can act in the narratives:

- *Manifest participation*: Adhere to social formalities and the law. For example, engaging and cooperating with law enforcement or obeying legal formal positions to achieve change.
- *Latent participation*: Focus on civic groups and civil engagement. For example, focusing on giving civilians agency to engage them in the situation or acting based on what they believe is right for society.
- *Active non-participation*: Choose not to abide by the systems in place in society, alternatively not interested in engaging with society's issues but only in personal matters. For example, they do not engage in finding societal solutions to issues. Could also include random acts of violence.
- *Passive non-participation*: Distance themselves from any conflict. For example, not seeing the conflict as concerning themselves and that it is not their responsibility to solve conflicts.

Depending on the condition of the participation and non-participation, they can either produce democratic or nondemocratic outcomes. Therefore, none of the forms of participation or non-participation can be considered inherently democratic or nondemocratic.

5.1.4 Anarchy and guardianship

As previously mentioned, the characters analysed in this study will not be assumed to act in a democratic condition, nor are the characters assumed to always produce a form of democracy through their actions. Therefore, it is necessary to have a framework to identify when something other than democracy is the condition of the characters' actions and when something else is produced or reproduced by the characters. Hence, this study will employ

Dahl's (1989) two alternative political ideals to democracy – anarchy and guardianship. Though it is important to note the democratic ideal is usually compared to the worst examples of alternative political ideals. In their ideal form, all three alternatives are supposed to cater to the people's best interest, but democracy is still considered the best one of the three (Dahl, 1989). Anarchy and guardianship will, together with democracy, be considered as the conditions and outcomes of the moment of decision, and they are expressed through the power relations, opportunities of choice, and the characters' actions.

The first alternative, anarchy, refers to the absence of a state. The core belief is that coercion is an evil in itself, thereby it is believed that all states are evil since they demand certain behaviours from their citizens (Dahl, 1989), meaning that the character would not engage with any form of systemic control over the people. Therefore, they would not engage in solving a conflict far removed from them or finding solutions that are applied across society, as no one should have that power over someone else because controlling people is inherently evil. Individual personal autonomy is important and unlike in democracy, where personal autonomy is limited by the majority's interest (Dahl, 1998), personal autonomy is favoured over all else.

The second alternative, guardianship, means that a qualified few have adequate competence and should take care of the incompetent many (Dahl, 1989). A guardianship can be both benevolent or malevolent, as the guardian(s) can either act in the interest of the collective or against it (Dahl, 1989). This alternative favour disengaging the majority's participation in the conflict to enhance the power of the minority, who are considered more competent to deal with the situation. This both includes a character removing the responsibility in the conflict from the people and the character considering themselves or someone else as the competent one caring for the incompetent many.

5.2 Structuration

Because the superhero genre has expanded into having interlinking narratives across films, the characters can be a side-character in one film and then evolve into becoming an antagonist in another film, encompassing larger processes of transformation. These transformative narratives allow the characters to be influenced by and influence the society around them in a variety of ways as they emerge as heroes or villains. And, as argued in the literature review,

the characters' actions influence whether they become a hero or a villain. However, someone's actions cannot be removed from the power relations, culture, and social practices which enable them (Mouffe, 2000), meaning that to understand how the characters act in the moments of decision it is necessary to understand them in relation to the society around them. Therefore, this study will employ structuration theory, which was presented by Anthony Giddens in *The Constitution of Society* (1984) and is his attempt at merging theories of structure with theories of action. Thereby, this study will cover how the conditions the characters act in influence their moments of decision and how the characters' actions influence their society.

According to structuration theory, society consists of agents, individuals, who are aware of the social structures around them when they make decisions. The agents' actions produce and reproduce systems that have consequences for future conditions of action. Society is therefore seen as dynamic, which is either transitioning or transmutating based on how the people act (A. Giddens, 1984). Thereby, structuration theory offers answers to how democracy is portrayed as transitioning or transmutating through how the characters act in their moments of decision. The theory divides society into systems (5.2.1), structures (5.2.2), and knowledgeable agents (5.2.3), which in this study will be respectively combined with power, opportunity of choice, and acting to understand how democratic society is produced or reproduced.

5.2.1 Systems

The characters in the superhero genre are not always acting as a part of the social institutions, still, they can have a relationship to the institutions when acting. The characters can interact with other characters representing either the people or a social institution, and in this manner society's systems are made visible. The systems are defined as the social relationships between people (A. Giddens, 1984), aligning with how Mouffe (2000) argued that power is based on social relationships. So, depending on how the characters act in relation to other characters, representing for example the leadership, the law enforcement, or the people, reveals whose power they legitimise and thus if they are reproducing democracy, or another political ideal (*cf.* 5.1.1).

Through the narrative the characters are given instructions or advice by other characters on how to act and through obeying or disobeying these instructions in the moments of decision the characters produce or reproduce systems of power. If a character chooses to fight or not align themselves with a social institution founded on the power of the people that could be considered nondemocratic. However, the social institutions can also be part of a nondemocratic condition, which could make the potential delegitimisation of the social institutions warranted as they could be acts to start producing democracy instead. But the characters' ability to align themselves or not with the social institutions is also influenced by structures, as structures influence agents' ability to act (A. Giddens, 1984).

5.2.2 Structures

Because the characters' actions are what causes them to emerge as heroes or villains, as argued in the literature review, it is interesting to consider what enables or constrains the actions in their moments of decision. How actions are enabled or constrained by society is what A. Giddens (1984) defines as structures. He considers structures as the internal process of people's rules and resources which influences their ability to act. Nevertheless, the structures are visualised through interaction with others, which is why structures in this study will be seen as external factors. It is the structures that limit or enable the characters' opportunity of choice leading to a moment of decision (*cf.* 5.1.2), hence the structures influence the characters' actions. In this study enabling or constraining factors could be the characters' superpowers, or lack thereof, or their status as a hero or villain, but it could also be other forms of positioning in society such as occupation or class.

An important aspect of structuration theory is that the agents are highly knowledgeable of the structures, knowledge they use in their everyday social practices (A. Giddens, 1984). This means that a character knows how and when the structures enable them to act, and where others may not be able to act. Therefore, the characters can choose to align with or oppose the structures which enable them to act but not others, revealing if they choose to produce democracy or alternative political ideals.

5.2.3 Agency

The chosen characters to be analysed are all considered to have a degree of agency over the outcome of the narrative in their moments of decision, meaning that they can either act or refrain from action (A. Giddens, 1984). It is through using their agency that the characters choose between participating or not in the conflict (*cf.* 5.1.3), which has consequences for how society is produced or reproduced. This will reveal what actions are portrayed as resulting in democratic or nondemocratic outcomes and how individuals are expected to use their agency in their conditions.

The actions performed by the characters are all considered to be intentional, meaning that the character believes that their action will achieve a specific outcome (A. Giddens, 1984). The characters' agency will therefore reveal how they consciously aim to produce or reproduce their society, and if they are successful. However, all actions have consequences. Consequences are events that would not have happened without the character's action, but that are outside of the scope of what they themselves can achieve (A. Giddens, 1984). The consequences are therefore also outcomes of the character's actions, which are either producing or reproducing the systems and structures of democracy or not.

5.3 Theoretical model

Democracy theory and structuration theory are joined to understand how the characters produce and reproduce democracy, or other political ideals, in their narratives. In *Figure 1* below, the theories are joined in a model designed for this study to visualise how the production and reproduction of democracy, anarchy, and guardianship unfolds.
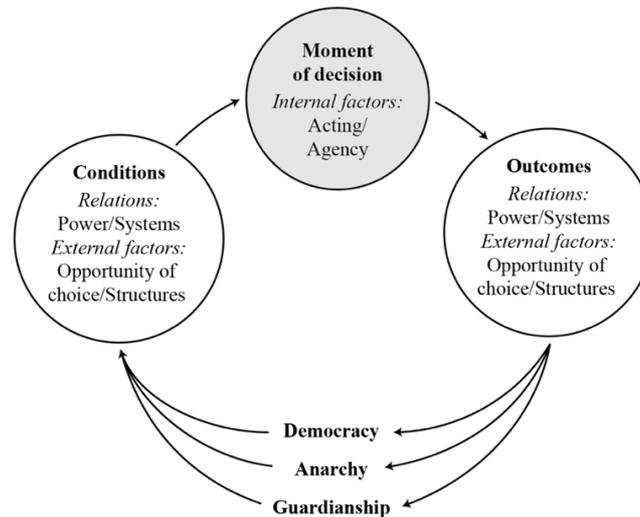
Figure 1: Moments of decision (based on joining democracy theory and structuration theory)

Democracy, anarchy, and guardianship are the three different political ideals that set the conditions through systems of power and structures of opportunity of choice. In these conditions, the characters' moments of decision take place, which is the situation where the character uses their agency to act or refrain from action. Depending on how the characters act (*cf.* 5.1.3; 5.2.3) in the moments of decision, they will produce outcomes that can either reproduce the conditions or produce new systems of power (*cf.* 5.1.1; 5.2.1) and structures of opportunity of choice (*cf.* 5.1.2; 5.2.2). These outcomes result in either democracy, anarchy, or guardianship, which constitute the conditions for the next moment of decision.

This theoretical model is applied to the moments of decision of the hero, villain, hero-turned-villain, villain-turned-hero, and antihero. To understand what the character narratives communicate about democracy through how the moments of decision unfold, the narrative analysis is used. Additionally, the narrative model of the hero's journey is applied to identify the moments of decision.

5.4 Critical disclaimer

Democracy will not be considered as the superior political ideal but as an alternative to guardianship and anarchy for the purpose of executing this analysis. As Dahl (1989) has pointed out, all three political ideals work to create a society that is functioning for everyone in their ideal form. So, if one political ideal is favoured, that risks affecting the results. The

narratives could potentially show guardianship or anarchy as celebrated and as working political ideals, which could be misinterpreted if democracy is considered as the only working ideal. However, while I as a researcher approach this study in this manner, I still regard democracy as the favourable political ideal, agreeing with Dahl (1989) that while all three ideals have their own issues, democracy is still the ideal that is the most favourable for the most people because it ensures the majority's right to participate in society, among other things.

6. Method

The narrative analysis is employed to understand when the characters' moments of decision occur and what they communicate about democracy. The narrative analysis enables the analysis of the causal relationship between the events in a narrative and thus what outcomes the characters' actions have. It also enables the study of how the actions communicate different messages depending on which character performs the action and if it is successful for the character. The analysis focuses on the scenes in the narrative where the characters have the most agency to act, the characters' moments of decision, which are identified using the hero's journey.

6.1 Narrative analysis

Characters in a narrative embody social principles which interact with each other (Hansen & Machin, 2019), and depending on the character type the actions in the narrative will be communicated differently. The hero's actions are communicated as the ones to be celebrated, especially when they are successful, and the villain's actions communicate threats to society (Ryan & Lenos, 2012). Therefore, the hero, villain, hero-turned-villain, villain-turned-hero, and antihero can all communicate about democracy and other political ideals in a variety of ways. The different character types can also give an understanding to how democracy is communicated as something to be celebrated, and when the other ideals are instead celebrated, based on if the action is successful in reaching the character's goals or not. If the action led to a character's failure, then the action cannot be considered either successful or threatening.

The characters cause things to happen in narratives, which moves the narrative forward (Abrams et al., 2010). So, because narratives are linked chains of events where actions lead to consequences (Abrams et al., 2010), it is the characters' actions that have consequences for future situations of action, revealing if they are successful or not and thus communicated as celebrated or threatening. This works similarly to how the moments of decision are considered to produce and reproduce society, as explained in the theory chapter. Therefore, the narrative analysis can identify the moments of decision for the characters. To determine these moments the narrative model called the hero's journey is applied to the character

narratives.

6.1.1 The hero's journey

The hero's journey outlines a character narrative of transformation, making it appropriate for this study to see what causes the transformation, or lack thereof, in the characters. The journey consists of seventeen stages divided into three sections (Campbell, 1949/2011), as presented in *Figure 2*. The hero's journey and Campbell's conception of a universal hero character have been heavily criticised. For example, folklorist Alan Dundes (2005) criticises Campbell's method for being unacademic by excluding stories that opposed his idea when he forged his theory. Dundes also rejects the idea that there is a universal myth and a set of archetype characters, and argues that Campbell's journey only applies to the white Western man. However, in this study, the hero's journey is not applied as a theory, but as a tool to understand when characters' moments of decision occur. Therefore, the original narrative model has been adapted to clarify concisely what happens in each stage, including renaming several stages so the name reflects the event in each stage and reformulating the definitions so they can apply to all character types. While this does not consolidate all the criticisms of the hero's journey, it enables it to be used as a method for this analysis of Western character narratives.

Departure	Initiation	Return
Call to adventure (The call to adventure): Destiny has called the character to enter an uncertain sphere (p.52), a new stage in life (p. 50).	*Trials (The road of trials)*: The character faces new challenges in the unknown and is aided by the previously given powers (p. 91). The trials clarify and deepen the conflict from the first threshold (p. 100).	*Refuse to change (Refusal of the return)*: The character doubts that they should return to their home to renew their society based on their new learnings (p. 185).
Call to adventure is rejected (Refusal of the call): The character tries to continue life as usual, but that leads them to become trapped in work, boredom, or a culture, which removes their agency (p. 53).	*Meeting with the guide (Meeting with the goddess)*: The character meets someone who embodies the end of the journey and is reminded that a world in order still exists (p. 104). The character also receives new knowledge and guidance (p. 110).	*Magic flight (The magic flight)*: The crisis upon the return is surrounded either by the protection of the leaders from the unknown sphere or by the persecution from them (p. 189).
Assistance (Supernatural aid): When the call to adventure is accepted, the character is given a power to help them, either a new ability or an assisting character, in their fight against their opponents (p. 65).	*False ending (Woman as temptress)*: The first tension from passing the threshold has been mastered (p. 115), and now the	*Outside saviour (Rescue from without)*: The known world aids the character in the crisis upon their return (p. 199).

Passing the return threshold (The crossing of the return threshold): The ideas from the known and unknown sphere clash (p. 216). |

Passing the first threshold (The crossing of the first threshold): The character reaches the border of the known sphere, where they meet a guarding force, which wants the character to stay on the known side of the border (p. 73). However, the hero's journey always entails crossing the border over to the unknown (p. 77).	character hopes that the journey is completed (p. 116). *Atonement (Atonement with the father)*: The character sheds the idea of who they thought they were to become what they are (p.124) and is given radically different relations to the characters in the known sphere (p. 131).	*Finding balance (The master of the two worlds)*: The character can travel in both spheres in acceptance and without pitting them against each other (p. 221). The character returns to normal life (p. 232). *Freedom to live (Freedom to live)*: There is a resolution between the individual will and the universal will (p. 233).
Rebirth (Belly of the whale): A low point for the character, as they are assumed to have been defeated, but the character is just being reborn (p. 85), which gives the character the ability to move across the borders without fear (p. 88).	*Elevation (Apotheosis)*: The character realises that they are the saviour and must do what they want to get done (p. 155). *Final gift (The ultimate boon)*: The character searches and receives mercy or recognition from superior characters (p. 171).	

Figure 2: The Hero's Journey (adapted from Campbell (1949/2011). Original name of stages in parenthesis.)

Not every stage includes a moment of decision for the characters. Therefore, the narratives are first outlined according to the seventeen stages, then each narrative is analysed to identify in which stages the character in question is given agency to move the narrative forward, presented in detail in *Appendix 1*. The stages which included a moment of decision for at least one of the characters are: Call to adventure is rejected, Assistance, Crossing the first threshold, Rebirth, Trials, False ending, Atonement, Elevation, Outside saviour, Passing the return threshold, Finding balance, and Freedom to live.

The original outline has room for narratives to vary regarding which narrative stage is focused upon, and side-characters in the narrative can be merged (Campbell, 1949/2011, p. 240). Also, as the narrative model was designed based on protagonists, not all narrative stages are present in all narratives, especially when considering characters who are not protagonists, while some have several scenes representing one narrative stage. Also, Campbell's model does not account for sequels to narratives, which is why the narratives unfolding across several films will be considered as one cohesive narrative and not as separate narratives. To identify the stages and understand them properly the character narratives are analysed in chronological order, which adheres to Winterhalter's (2015) arguments of how to employ the journey for narrative analysis. It is the scenes containing the stages with the moments of decision, including their conditions and outcomes, which constitute the material of the study.

6.2 Material

The material for the study consists of scenes containing moments of decision in the character narratives of a hero, a villain, a hero-turned-villain, a villain-turned-hero, and an antihero. Nowadays, with multiple interpretations of the same character in different films and with the cinematic universes of for example Marvel, it is common that the characters' actions reference other superhero films in the superhero genre, both implicitly and explicitly. Therefore, it is the character and their narrative which will constitute the material, instead of limiting the analysis to specific films, which risks eliminating relevant units of analysis.

While the different character types (*cf.* 2.1) offer a heterogeneous material, the character narratives to represent each character type were chosen through purposeful sampling to find narratives that can provide fruitful answers to the research questions. The hero's journey was then applied to the character narratives to reveal in which stages the characters have a moment of decision, which is presented in detail in *Appendix 1*. The hero narrative belongs to Spider-Man/Peter Parker/Peter Three (Peter), in *The Amazing Spider-Man* duology (2012, 2014) and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), who is a protagonist with good intentions. His moments of decision take place in the stages: Call to adventure is rejected, Crossing the first threshold, Elevation, Passing the return threshold, and Finding balance. The villain is Killmonger/Erik Stevens/N'Jadaka (N'Jadaka), in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. He is the antagonist who opposes the goals of the protagonist in his story while matching the protagonist in power. His moments of decision happen in the stages: Crossing the first threshold, Rebirth, False ending, Atonement, and Finding balance.

The hero-turned-villain narrative is Two-Face/Harvey Dent (Harvey) in *The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012); he is first described as the salvation of Gotham but later turns into the villain Two-Face. Harvey's moments of decision appear in the stages: Rebirth, Trials, Elevation, and Passing the return threshold. The villain-turned-hero narrative is Loki. Loki's narrative is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where he is initially portrayed as the villain but ends up fighting alongside the heroes in the later films. The stages portraying his moments of decision are: Call to adventure is rejected, False ending, Passing the return threshold, and Freedom to live. Loki also has a second major alternative narrative within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, as a variant in the multiverse, featured in the television series

Loki which started in 2021. However, as the narrative of the second Loki variant has just begun, while the first narrative has reached completion, only the narrative of the first variant of Loki will be included in the analysis.

Lastly, the antihero narrative is Deadpool/Wade Wilson's (Wade) narrative in the two released *Deadpool* films (2016, 2018), which is a standalone story but part of the X-men Universe. Wade's moments of decision happen in Assistance, Trials, Atonement, Outside saviour, and Finding balance. As these narratives cover transitioning and transmutating narratives of both heroes and villains, they will be able to offer a broad spectrum of how democracy is communicated by the characters through their interaction with their surroundings.

7. Analysis

The focus of the analysis is to explore democracy, anarchy, and guardianship through the characters' interaction with their society to understand how the political ideals are portrayed. First, the analysis will cover the conditions in which the characters act (RQ1), then the structures in the conditions which influence the character's actions (RQ2), and lastly how the characters' actions produce or reproduce society (RQ3). All the narrative stages for each character narrative are accounted for in full in *Appendix 1*.

7.1 The conditions

The first research question, about how the political ideals are portrayed as conditioning the characters' actions, is answered. The political ideals are analysed through the systems of power surrounding the characters' actions in their moments of decision. The characters in this study were found to act in three different conditions: guardianship, democracy, and democracy with features of other ideals, which will be discussed below. It was the villain and the villain-turned-hero who acted in the guardianship, the hero acted in the democracy, and the antihero and hero-turned-villain acted in the democracy with features of other ideals.

7.1.1 Guardianship

Because systems of power consist of social relationships (A. Giddens, 1984; Mouffe, 2000), the relationships between characters reveal the conditions in the character narratives. Regarding the actions of Loki, the villain-turned-hero, they are conditioned by his relationships with his father, who is King Odin of the planet Asgard, and his brother Thor, who has been chosen by Odin as the successor to the throne (Branagh, 2011). Early in the narrative, Odin reveals to Loki that Loki is not biologically Asgardian, but of an enemy species, and he was adopted into Asgard by Odin (Branagh, 2011, 00:39:30–00:41:48). So, while Loki is a prince of Asgard, he does not have the same relationship with his father as his brother does, which also seems to limit Loki's access to the throne, showing that while both Loki and his brother Thor are princes of Asgard, they are not equal. This suggests the need for a hierarchy in guardianship to clarify who is deemed competent to rule, and due to the constant division between the competent and incompetent, guardianships can never offer

equality to the people. In Asgard, the competence to rule seems to be based on biological heritage, also referred to as the blood right to rule. Though the biological hierarchy is complicated in Loki's narrative as the chosen successor, Thor, is deemed unworthy of the throne by King Odin and is banished from Asgard, which leads Loki to ascend to the throne instead of Thor when Odin falls unconscious (Branagh, 2011). However, the people deem Loki unworthy of the throne as he is believed to only want it out of jealousy of Thor (Branagh, 2011, 00:38:43), though Thor later claims that Loki understands how to rule better than Thor himself ever will (Taylor, 2013, 01:39:50). At the point of Loki's ascension to the throne, it is still unclear who is better suited to rule, so it is interesting how the people side with the previously chosen successor and do not consider that Loki could be equally competent to rule. This indicates that the people's seemingly strong relationship with their benevolent guardian limits their ability to consider alternative guardians, who could be more competent, to take the throne.

Loki's complex relationship to the power in Asgard is further exemplified through his relationship with his father, Odin. Loki tries to show his father how he is competent enough to rule in his first moment of decision (Branagh, 2011), though this leads to him disobeying Odin's power as he does not accept Thor as the successor to the throne. And while Loki is a legitimate prince of Asgard, and in many cases, the most competent to ascend to the throne in Asgard, his relationship with his father, and King, is constraining him. Suggesting that because he is not given a chance to ascend to the throne based on his competence, he becomes a villain. As guardianship relies on the idea of the competent caring for the incompetent (Dahl, 1989), Loki's narrative exposes the guardianship structure to fundamental criticism. The guardian of Asgard, however benevolent he is, seems to choose his successor based on biological relationship, rather than based on competence. This suggests that the succession of power in guardianships is as reliant on social relations as Mouffe (2000) argues that power itself is, which could have major implications for who has the conditions to emerge as a hero or a villain. Had Loki's and Thor's relationships with their father been equal, then Loki could have been able to ascend to the throne based on his competence to rule, which would follow the idea of guardianship, while Thor could have served as a defender of Asgard by being a warrior. Through these alternative roles, Odin could have prevented Loki from emerging as a villain. But because Loki is not seen as worthy, seemingly based on his non-Asgardian heritage, he acts to show his father his competence, constantly delegitimising Thor as successor by trying to prove himself as worthy of the throne despite his heritage. So, in Loki's

guardianship condition he is not given space to act which matches his abilities, causing him to delegitimise the orders of King Odin as well as Thor's role as successor. This suggests that society's ability to provide a space of action which matches someone's abilities is needed for characters not to emerge as villains.

The guardianship in the villain's, N'Jadaka's, narrative is also reliant on the idea of the competence being inherited biologically, which is what gives N'Jadaka power in the guardianship of the African country Wakanda. N'Jadaka is the cousin of the sitting King of Wakanda, T'Challa, which enables him to legitimately overthrow T'Challa and replace him as the guardian (Coogler, 2018). The power invested in the ruling guardian is visible through N'Jadaka's relationship with the counsel of advisors, consisting of the heads of the tribes who live in Wakanda, and the relationship with representatives of the people surrounding the guardian. There are two moments of decision where the power of the guardian is most visible, in N'Jadaka's *False ending* and his *Atonement* stage (*cf.* 6.1.1). First, in the False ending, N'Jadaka speaks with a woman of the people after he has been crowned king and given the powers of the superpowered entity Black Panther. The woman says that they must preserve the herbs which gave N'Jadaka his powers so they can use them to crown the next king, when N'Jadaka then orders her to burn the herbs, she refuses to obey so he uses violence to make her comply (Coogler, 2018, 01:28:11–01:29:21). In the next moment of decision, he orders the council of advisors to start a war against those who have oppressed the black diaspora, which is against Wakandian tradition to stay out of conflict (Coogler, 2018, 01:29:31–01:31:19). Despite these actions going against tradition, the people eventually obey the orders of N'Jadaka as he is considered to be the legitimate king. However, when N'Jadaka's cousin T'Challa returns, showing that the battle over the throne is not finished, members of the people and army quickly disobey N'Jadaka (Coogler, 2018, 01:42:16–01:44:07). This mirrors Mouffe's (2000) idea that power can only be imposed if legitimised, so it is through how the people disobey N'Jadaka as soon as they do not see him as legitimate that his power is beginning to fade. However, as the people obeyed N'Jadaka when they considered him as legitimate, despite him acting malevolently, the narrative also suggests that even malevolent power can be considered legitimate. The villain narrative thus shows how in a guardianship the people are vulnerable to malevolent power, because if the guardian has gained the power legitimately, the guardian can, through the power in their title, legitimately enforce decisions that goes against the desires of the people. Meaning that in a guardianship it is the legitimate

position of the guardian which legitimises the guardian's actions, and as long as the people legitimise the guardianship they also legitimise the guardian.

Together the narratives of the villain-turned-hero and the villain show the complexity of a guardianship regarding who is considered competent and whose power is legitimate. Both show that guardianship as a form of governance has major flaws regarding the succession of power. In both cases, the previous kings, Odin and T'Challa, can be considered benevolent, as they act in the best interest of their people, but the guardianship societies are unstable due to the succession of power because a benevolent guardian cannot ensure that no future guardians will be malevolent. However, this potential criticism in these narratives is diluted since the benevolent guardians, T'Challa, Thor, and Odin, are always able to stop the villains. This suggests that the people in guardianships do not have to act to change the conditions they are in, as they will eventually be saved by a benevolent guardian, reflecting the passive participation of the people in guardianships. But the narratives fail to consider what happens to the people if no benevolent guardian arrives to save them.

7.1.2 Democracy

The hero, superpowered high school student Peter, acts in a democratic condition, which is clarified through his relationship with the law enforcement. When Peter is first given superpowers, he starts acting as Spider-Man to capture criminals on his own, which he delivers to the police (Webb, 2012). Though this puts him into conflict with the police, leading him to an argument with Police Captain Stacy, who names Spider-Man an anarchist disrupting the police work (Webb, 2012, 01:17:20–01:09:48). Unknowingly, Peter has therefore delegitimised the power of the democratic law enforcement, but by immediately obeying Captain Stacy and changing his course of action in his next moment of decision to protect the people instead of hunting villains, Peter legitimises the power of the democratic law enforcement. This shows how the systems of power in the democratic ideal allow Peter to act; however, he is constrained by the consequences on the rest of society, which is the one factor that should constrain individual action in a democracy (Dahl, 1998). So, when Peter starts to show anarchistic tendencies by fighting villains beyond the law, Captain Stacy defends democratic action, causing Peter to become a resource for society instead, by using his superpowers to legitimise the social institutions. Thereby, the relationship between Peter and Captain Stacy reflects how democracy's institutions, which protect the rights of the

people, must be defended and legitimised for democracy to survive, mirroring the arguments of Dahl (1998).

Since democracy must allow for opposing opinions to foster (Mouffe, 2000), while offering equal freedom for individuals to choose the course of action (Dahl, 1989), a space is created within the foundation of democracy where individuals can choose to legitimise the anarchistic or guardianship political ideals. These spaces will be called *pockets of alternate ideals*, which also show how structuration works as the agents change the systems and structures through their actions (A. Giddens, 1984). In the real-world society, these spaces can be any closed social settings spanning from organised crime to radical religious groups and work environments and in this study, they are visible in the antihero and hero-turned-villain narratives.

The antihero, Wade, is acting in a condition that is presumably democratic, as he is living in the United States. The democratic condition is exhibited through the organisation of the superpowered heroes who follow a set of rules for how to act as a hero (Leitch, 2018; Miller, 2016). Still, Wade encounters villains such as Ajax, who runs an illegal organisation experimenting on the hopeless to create a superpowered army for himself (Miller, 2016), and the headmaster of a school who abuses superpowered children because they are considered as unholy (Leitch, 2018). Society overall is still democratic, but these individuals and others around them have started to create pockets of alternate ideals where anarchy and guardianship are allowed to foster. The individuals in the illegal organisation and in the school use their agency to legitimise these new ideals, creating a condition of democracy with pockets. So, if the people stop practicing the systems and stop legitimising them, these pockets appear and will pose a threat to the democratic ideal, showing why democracy is both a system of power and a practice (Dahl, 1998; Mouffe, 2000).

The threat that the pockets of alternate ideals can grow into, if not dealt with, is reflected in Harvey's, the hero-turned-villain's, narrative where criminality has corrupted the democratic society. Harvey is a District Attorney working in the city of Gotham, and he is legitimising the democratic system by using justice by democratic legal systems to punish the criminals in Gotham (Nolan, 2008). Though, the criminals have relations with people on every level of society, including most people in the law enforcement, which threatens the stability and the power of the social institutions in Gotham. Since obedience legitimises power (Mouffe, 2000), the democracy in Gotham has become unstable as the people do not obey the

democratic rules and instead start obeying the criminals. So, in the condition of Harvey's actions, the democratic ideal is at risk of failing because the people have stopped expressing their power through practice, which once again aligns with Dahl's (1998) idea that democracy must be practiced to survive.

In sum, Peter, the hero, is acting in a condition of functioning democracy, while both Wade, the antihero, and Harvey, the hero-turned-villain, act in democracies where pockets of alternate ideals are threatening society. These different conditions presented above provide the characters with different types of threats to combat and a variety of resources to do so, which according to structuration theory (A. Giddens, 1984) influences how they can use their agency.

7.2 Influencing action

The power systems set the conditions, as presented above, influencing the character's action through how they provide the characters with resources to act. The resources constitute the structures that enable or constrain the characters' actions (A. Giddens, 1984) and thus influence how they are enabled or constrained to emerge as villains or heroes. This will answer the second research question of how society's structures are portrayed as influencing the characters' actions during their moments of decision. First, the structures which the villains emerge through are analysed, followed by the structures which enable the heroes to emerge. Both the villains and the heroes offer perspectives on how their character types emerge differently depending on the conditions.

7.2.1 Emerging as villains

The villain, N'Jadaka, was born in the United States and grew up under racial oppression (Coogler, 2018), which were constraining structures for him within that society. But as N'Jadaka is also the cousin of King T'Challa of the advanced African country Wakanda, the structures in the Wakandian guardianship society enable him to challenge the sitting king for the throne due to his heritage (Coogler, 2018). The conflict of the structures N'Jadaka acts through, where his heritage constrains him in one structure and enables him in another, is the foundation of his narrative. A. Giddens (1984) argues that the agents are knowledgeable of

the structures around them, and N'Jadaka explicitly shows this by explaining that while there are powerful black people living comfortable lives in the African country Wakanda, the world is filled with black people whose lives are difficult, despite Wakanda's ability to aid them (Coogler, 2018, 01:13:18–01:16:44). N'Jadaka is therefore not only aware of these structures, which have both constrained and enabled him, but the conflict of the structures is what motivates him to act, as he seeks revenge for the constraining structures he grew up under by using his enabling structures in Wakanda. This suggests that constraining structures are what causes villains to emerge, as it influences them to act with whatever means available to change those structures.

The villain-turned-hero narrative of Loki mirrors the results of constraining structures being the cause for villains to emerge. When Loki's brother Thor is banished to Earth and their father, King Odin, falls unconscious, the throne on planet Asgard is left empty, so Loki ascends to the throne to rule the Asgardian people (Branagh, 2011). This is when Loki's first moment of decision occurs. He stages a murder attempt on Odin to be able to invade an enemy species as a way of proving himself competent enough to rule (Branagh, 2011, 01:32:57–01:40:51). In this moment of decision, he is enabled by his class, as he is the only one in the royal family left on Asgard to ascend to the throne. Through the guardianship structure, where the competent few have the responsibility to care for the incompetent many (Dahl, 1989), Loki's ascension to the throne could be seen as an act of responsibility as the last one of the competent taking care of the incompetent. Though, Loki states that he only wanted the throne to be considered equal to his brother Thor (Branagh, 2011, 01:36:25), who is the chosen successor to the throne. So, the unequal structure of guardianship is both a resource for Loki to use to act against others and the constraining factor which motivates him to act, causing him to emerge as a villain, similar to how N'Jadaka emerged as a villain. The guardianship's simultaneously enabling and constraining structures further the discussion on hierarchy in guardianships which was presented previously. The structures surrounding Loki show how he is on the one hand given opportunity of choice to act in his best interest, express his opinion, and control events through his status, but on the other hand, because of the hierarchy in guardianship, that power is limited as his decisions can always be overturned by someone of higher status than him.

The narratives of the villain and the villain-turned-hero suggest that it is unequally constraining structures that cause villains to emerge. The constraining structures surrounding the characters provide them with motivation to act to change the structures so they can be

equal to others, have the opportunity to express their opinion, control what happens around them, and act according to their best interest – all of which are democratic features (Dahl, 1989). So, equality could be what prevents the emergence of villains. However, the hero-turned-villain, Harvey, shows how the enabling structures for people in power in the democratic ideal can also cause villains to emerge.

Harvey works as a District Attorney who is trying to counter the pockets of alternate ideals, spaces in democracies where other political ideals are legitimised, which have grown strong in Gotham through criminality and corruption. His position in the democratic juridical system is what enables him to start deceiving the public, as Harvey can call a press conference to claim that he is Batman when the people want Batman's identity revealed (Nolan, 2008, 01:07:54–01:09:22). In this moment of decision, Harvey's position enables him to take control over the situation through the deception, despite it going against the interest of the majority. This suggests that in democracy certain positions are surrounded by enabling structures that could potentially be abused for personal interest, despite the fact that democracy should provide an equal and adequate opportunity of choice to everyone (Dahl, 1989). This further suggests that it is when these enabling structures are abused that previously celebrated people in democracies can turn into threats to society.

Harvey's position and the way he has fought the criminals through democratic action also expose him to the villains. Eventually, his fiancée is murdered, and because the hero Batman is occupied with the villain the Joker, Batman fails to prevent Harvey from transitioning into a villain (Nolan, 2008). Batman is a member of the people, who is distracted by another villain who keeps Batman from noticing how Harvey is transitioning into a villain before it is too late. The distraction portrayed by Batman suggests that the people have a responsibility to recognise when those in power overstep the democratic boundaries. Because as the people are aware of the structures enabling themselves and others (A. Giddens, 1984), they need to remain aware of who is capable of abusing their enabling structures and act to prevent them from doing so, even if someone is abusing the structures with good intentions. Otherwise, the people risk enabling a villain to emerge in their society.

7.2.2. Emerging as heroes

The hero, Peter, is a high-school student in New York, living an ordinary life when he gets superpowers from a spider bite (Webb, 2012), so compared to Loki and N'Jadaka's regal status and Harvey's professional position, Peter does not have the same enabling structures surrounding him. Therefore his main enabling structure is his superpowers, which he uses while wearing a mask to conceal his identity (Webb, 2012, 2014). His secret identity enables him to remain in his ordinary life and remain a member of the people. But Peter's support from the people is shown as equally important as his superpowers. First, when Peter is wounded on his way to fight a villain, construction workers organise their cranes to give Peter an open path to swing from to get to the villain (Webb, 2012, 01:07:41–01:51:30). Then, when Peter has stopped being Spider-Man, both the people and the law enforcement call for his return as the villains are taking over the society (Webb, 2014, 02:06:12–02:12:30). So, while Peter is the person with superpowers, his actions are enabled by the people who can express their opinion and have control over the situation which concerns them. It is only within these structures Peter is allowed to act, showing how the hero in the democratic condition emerges as someone who answers to the opportunity of choice of the people.

But the democratic condition allows for pockets of alternate ideals, spaces within a democracy where individuals can choose to legitimise anarchy or guardianship (*cf.* 7.1.2). When democracy struggles to mitigate these pockets, they create conflict, which is portrayed in the antihero's, Wade's, narrative and most visible in the moment of decision in his *Atonement* stage (*cf.* 6.1.1). Wade has joined the regulated superhero group the X-men on a mission to a school for superpowered children where a child is acting violently against the school staff. During the mission, it is revealed that the children are tortured and controlled by the headmaster and teachers which is motivating the child's violence (Leitch, 2018, 00:27:20–00:33:54). In this situation, Wade should be constrained by the rules surrounding the heroes and let the law enforcement deal with the situation, but as he notices that they will not be able to mitigate this pocket of alternate ideals, he is motivated to kill the school staff to mitigate the pocket himself. Wade exhibits high awareness of the structures surrounding him, reflecting structuration theory (A. Giddens, 1984), and is thus motivated to act where the structures fail to protect the people. Indicating that the difference between how the hero and the antihero emerges is that the hero acts through the opportunity of choice of the people, thus also according to the democratic ideal (Dahl, 1989), while the antihero acts against the

pockets of alternate ideals, even when that means acting against the rules of the democratic system.

In his final narrative stages, the villain-turned-hero, Loki, transitions from being a villain to emerging as a hero. As discussed before, Loki attributes his actions to his inferiority to his brother, Thor (Branagh, 2011, 01:36:25). Leading up to his transition, Loki has a conversation with Thor who is about to return to their planet Asgard to save their people from the villain, Hela (Waititi, 2017, 01:28:23–01:30:09). In their conversation Thor tells Loki that he thought that they would fight alongside each other forever (Waititi, 2017, 01:29:29), showing how Thor always considered Loki his equal even if Thor was the chosen successor to the throne. While this could exemplify Thor's unawareness of the structures enabling him to be a hero, it also provides Loki with a space to act where he is no longer inferior to Thor. Later, Thor also tells Loki that Loki can decide to change if he wants to, explaining that Loki should not let his previous actions stop him from growing (Waititi, 2017, 01:30:58–01:31:31). Thereby, Thor allows Loki to start acting like they are equals, leading to the moment of decision where Loki returns to Asgard to help Thor save their people (Waititi, 2017, 01:46:40–01:47:23), and thus emerges as a hero. By presenting Loki as an equal to Thor, the narrative attempts to consolidate the hierarchy issue of guardianship, but the guardianship ideal is still founded on unequal power relations. The need for a space to act and unequal power structures could instead be arguments for the democratic political ideal, which relies on equality and everyone's ability to explore and act according to their own best interest, among other things (Dahl, 1989). This means that despite Loki and his brother's ability to consolidate the equality issue amongst themselves, the guardianship ideal can never provide true equality for the people.

7.3 Production and reproduction through action

Now, the analysis will turn to the third research question about how the characters produce and reproduce democracy, or other political ideals, through their actions. As discussed and shown in the theoretical model (5.3), action occurs in the context of the power systems and the structures of opportunity of choice. And as the characters are considered knowledgeable agents, they can choose to either reproduce the systems and structures around them or use their agency to produce new systems and structures (*cf.* 5.2.3). In addition, since villains represent threats to society and heroes represent celebrated characteristics (Ryan & Lenos,

2012), the character type decides whether a character's action is portrayed as threatening or celebrated. Here, the threatening actions performed by the villains are presented before the celebrated actions of the heroes.

7.3.1 Threatening actions

N'Jadaka, the villain, acts in the guardianship of Wakanda, which at the beginning of the narrative can be considered benevolent when N'Jadaka's cousin T'Challa is king since T'Challa acts in the interest of the majority and follows the people's traditions. As previously discussed, N'Jadaka uses the systems and structures in place to rise to power, then he reproduces the guardianship structure in a malevolent manner. First, he acts with violence toward a member of the people when she questions his order to destroy the herbs which give the Wakandian king the superpowers of the hero entity Black Panther (Coogler, 2018, 01:28:34–01:29:29). In this case, N'Jadaka shows that he will use violence if the people attempt to participate in society, suggesting that he wants them to be passive non-participants who do not engage in conflicts but leaves them for someone else to solve. Second, he ignores his counsel of advisors who explain that Wakanda has a tradition to stay out of war and instead orders them to initiate a war (Coogler, 2018, 01:29:31–01:31:19). This action clarifies how N'Jadaka believes that he is the only one competent to make decisions, aligning with the idea of guardianship (Dahl, 1989) and thus also acting to reproduce it. Both of these instances show how N'Jadaka uses coercive power obtained by being the guardian to enforce his power when he is questioned, mirroring Dahl's (1998) argument that a malevolent guardian turns coercive when their competence to rule is questioned. This also limits the people's opportunity of choice, as they are not allowed to express their opinion, control the agenda, or explore their own best interests. Despite N'Jadaka's malevolent reproduction of guardianship, the people continue to legitimise his power by obeying his instructions, because he is their guardian. It is only when N'Jadaka's cousin T'Challa, who was presumed dead, returns to fight N'Jadaka for the throne again that the people start fighting against N'Jadaka (Coogler, 2018, 01:42:13–01:44:07). Implying that in a guardianship, the guardian will be legitimised, no matter how the guardian acts, if the people do not know of a viable alternative to be their ruler. Therefore, a lack of perceivable alternative guardians can enable a malevolent guardian to enter a benevolent guardianship using the structures to gain power and then reproduce society to remove the people further from the power.

Harvey, the hero-turned-villain, instead acts in a democratic condition, albeit with pockets of alternate ideals, which are spaces in a democracy where other political ideals are produced (7.1.2). At the beginning of Harvey's narrative, he uses legal and democratic means to punish the criminals who create the pockets by using the justice system (Nolan, 2008), meaning that he uses manifest participation through adhering to the law to change society. However, his position also enables him to deceive the people and claim that he is Batman to capture the villain the Joker, as discussed before. By starting to deceive the public, he removes their capability to engage in the conflict, limiting their ability to participate. Thus, Harvey reproduces that the people should be passive non-participants and leave the managing of conflicts to the competent, which is similar to the guardianship ideal of the competent taking care of the incompetent (Dahl, 1989). Harvey's actions of deviating from democracy to achieve his intended goal of capturing the villain make him the target of the people acting in the pockets, leading to his fiancée being murdered (Nolan, 2008, 01:31:37–01:32:05). Now, Harvey is no longer interested in legal justice but fair punishment for those responsible for his fiancée's death, causing him to break the democratic rules for his personal interest. He uses his agency to join the structures of the pockets and starts to produce active non-participation, since he no longer engages in the societal issue of corruption and criminality, but only focuses on punishing those he deems responsible for his grief, making his actions resemble those of an anarchist. The downward spiral of Harvey's actions shows that if someone steps out of the democratic system once and thus starts delegitimising it, even for good reason, the system will likely continue to be abused also for personal reasons, which contributes to the erosion of democracy.

The narratives of the villain and the hero-turned-villain exhibit the importance to remain aware of the actions of those in power and how they can abuse the structures around them, whether they are acting in guardianship or democracy. Because in both political ideals villains can rise to use their agency to reproduce or produce structures that constrain the people. The analysis below will instead show how the heroes act in guardianship or democracy to reproduce society.

7.3.2 Celebrated actions

As discussed above, the people in guardianships seem to remain loyal to a malevolent guardian if that is their only option. Only if another viable option of guardian is known do

they use their agency to counter the malevolent guardian, a result mirrored in the villain-turned-hero narrative. In this narrative, Loki attempts to abuse the structures around him to ascend to the throne on planet Asgard to replace his brother Thor (Branagh, 2011; Taylor, 2013; Waititi, 2017). However, the people of Asgard favour Thor as their guardian and thus use their agency legitimise Thor's power instead of Loki's power, which causes Loki to continuously fail in his attempts at the throne. Thus, Loki cannot reproduce the guardianship with himself as guardian, which portrays the importance of the people using their agency to reproduce the society they desire, as power is only sustained as long as it is legitimised (Mouffe, 2000). However, it is interesting how Loki has in most of his narrative tried to prove that, even though he is not biologically the child of King Odin of Asgard, he is competent enough to rule over Asgard, critiquing the guardianship ideal he acts in. But as soon as his own position is affirmed, through being treated as an equal by his brother Thor whom Loki has always felt inferior to (Waititi, 2017, 01:28:23–01:30:09), Loki chooses to legitimise the guardianship by obeying his brother's advice. As he has now transitioned into a hero, who helps save the Asgardian people, this reproduction of the guardianship ideal becomes problematic as a celebrated action, because he only critiques the political ideal when it is not favourable for him. Otherwise, he refrains from using his agency to act against the systems and structures, producing the idea that it is only worth participating in conflicts that pose disadvantages to oneself, which resembles active non-participation. Loki's actions also produce the idea that he has no responsibility to solve conflicts that only affect others, aligning with passive non-participation. This indicates that the role of the hero in a guardianship is complex, especially when the hero is not the guardian.

The antihero is another character who challenges the idea of the celebrated actions of the hero. Wade, the antihero, acts in democratic conditions which contain pockets of alternate ideals, spaces in a democracy where anarchy and guardianship have begun to grow. When Wade encounters these pockets, he does not legitimise the systems and structures to give them room to grow, instead, he acts to eliminate the ones responsible for the pockets. First, he kills Ajax, a villain who runs an illegal organisation torturing people through experimental treatments (Miller, 2016), then he aims to kill the abusive staff at a school for superpowered children (Leitch, 2018). Wade states that being a hero means "doing the ugly stuff no one else will do" (Leitch, 2018, 00:33:15) and that rules can be disregarded if you fight for what is right (Leitch, 2018, 00:33:35). Through these actions, Wade can be considered as an example of how the people should use their agency to produce the society they desire, which reflects

latent participation and could be seen as an example of civil disobedience as a method to mitigate the pockets of alternate ideals. So, through his actions, Wade refrains from reproducing the pockets and instead produces the idea that the citizen in a democracy must be attentive to where the borders of democracy lie because while democratic systems and structures are in place, there are those who will act to erode them. This mirrors Mouffe's (2000) argument that democracy is about practice, not only a system of rules. However, it is important to note that Wade still obeys the democratic law enforcement when he accepts the punishment for his violent actions and goes to prison (Leitch, 2018), showing that while he believes that a hero should use their agency to participate in mitigating pockets, they must also accept the potential punishment for these actions if illegal methods are considered necessary.

It could be argued that Wade, through using violence and acting by himself, is contributing to the erosion of the democratic condition. However, Wade is not the one creating these pockets through his actions, but he is using his democratically given agency to bring attention to a problem that society needs to solve. Had the pockets not existed, there would be no need for Wade to act to counter them. So through how he fights his villains, the antihero exposes the issue of how democracy needs to mitigate the pockets when they appear, while still maintaining what is the democratic principle of solving conflicts peacefully (Dahl, 1998). Therefore, a space is created between the threats against democracy and how democracy should be practiced, in a similar way as pockets of alternate ideals appear. This calls for an antihero of the people to act in the spaces that society's systems cannot reach while accepting that the democracy must punish them for it.

While the villain-turned-hero and antihero portray the complexity of heroic actions, due to their character types, the hero Peter offers a straightforward narrative of what it means to act as a hero in a democratic condition. Peter exemplifies how someone's agency can be used to reproduce structures that enable others to use their agency and thus invite their participation in solving the conflict. When Peter intends to save a boy from falling off a bridge in a car, he cannot reach the boy and therefore needs him to climb out of the car himself. To encourage the boy, Peter gives him the Spider-Man mask so the boy can save himself (Webb, 2012, 01:14:25–01:17:08). So, even though Peter is the hero, he urges the people he saves to also use their agency to reach their common intended goal. Therefore, Peter portrays the idea that everyone must be involved and actively participate to successfully develop society in the direction desired by the people, because a hero cannot singlehandedly save society. The

consequence of Peter saving the boy is that the boy's father decides to help Peter. He gathers his colleagues who work in construction cranes to arrange their cranes so they create a path for Spider-Man to get to the villain who is threatening society (Webb, 2012, 01:48:11–01:51:23). As Peter is injured, he would not have arrived in time to stop the villain if he did not get help from the people. Thus, Peter portrays the idea that the democratic hero has a set of resources to help the people, but these resources do not make the hero invincible, since he still needs the people to also use their resources and agency to help defeat the villain. He thereby invites the participation both latently and manifestly, as he engages the civilians to use their agency and resources and cooperates with the law enforcement to stop the villains. Through the way Peter uses his agency and resources, he grants the people control over the agenda by being incapable of defeating the villain himself. Thus, Peter uses his agency to reproduce the democratic condition in which his actions unfold, showing an example of how a member of the people can use their resources to unlock the agency of the people.

8. Discussion

Based on the results in the above analysis, which has explored the actions of a hero, villain, villain-turned-hero, hero-turned-villain, and antihero, the discussion will now answer the fourth research question of how a strong society is portrayed in the narratives. The fourth research question builds upon the previous questions and connects the results in the analysis to the previous research which furthers the theoretical discussion on democratic society, placing the answer in this chapter. Lastly, the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research are presented.

8.1 The strong society

The analysis showed that the characters all acted in various conditions, suggesting that the conditions are a deciding factor in who emerges as a villain and who emerges as a hero. The villain-turned-hero acted in a guardianship where he was constrained, similarly, the villain grew up under constraining structures, and both characters used this containment as motivation for their actions. Regarding the hero-turned-villain, it was his position in society that caused him to be targeted by villains and eventually become a villain himself, while the hero could instead act along with the structures to strengthen his society. These results complicate the view from previous research that a hero is only defined by their actions (Johnson, 2014; Manninen, 2018; Yogerst, 2017), as this analysis shows that the conditions might not always offer space for everyone to act heroically. Society's structures could therefore be the deciding factor for which actions are considered heroic, because if the structures offer unequal opportunities of choice to the people, then the structures are also offering unequal opportunities to be considered heroes. Therefore, the argument of heroes being defined by their actions is problematic, as that offers little to no sympathy for those whose actions are constrained by society and who are only granted agency to act in ways that are considered villainous. Consequently, society should offer equal agency for its people and provide the people with spaces to use their agency to strengthen the systems and structures. If not, threats can appear in society due to the structures, which is exemplified through the villain-turned-hero, whose lack of space to act caused him to use his agency in villainous manners.

As this analysis shows that the conditions seem to influence who is granted agency to act as a villain or a hero, it furthers Peters' (2015) argument that emphasis must be placed on what grants the hero or villain the ability to act to understand how the superhero narratives portray society. According to this analysis, heroes and villains are granted unequal opportunities to act, which causes them to emerge as their respective character types. If society produces unequal and inadequate opportunities of choice to act as a hero or a villain, society would be deviating from democracy according to Dahl (1989) who sees the opportunity of choice as fundamental to a democratic society, meaning that to understand who can emerge as a hero or a villain, the structures surrounding the characters must be observed. Hence, only when a society allows for everyone to have the equal freedom to choose how to act, it would be the actions that would define whether you are a hero or a villain for society, putting the arguments of Johnson (2014), Manninen (2018), and Yogerst (2017) further into question. Otherwise, it is the structures that form villains and heroes by constraining or enabling the spaces where they are granted agency.

If everyone in society was granted the equal agency to act, that would mean that society would foster a fruitful ground for conflict, which according to Mouffe (2000) is the basis of democracy. Though the analysis showed that this freedom of choice is also what could be creating spaces for other political ideals to grow, named here *the pockets of alternate ideals* (7.1.2). The hero-turned-villain narrative showed how these pockets could even encompass people working in democratic law enforcement through corruption. The pockets of alternate ideals could be seen as showing how a stable democracy breeds an unstable democracy, aligning with Goodrum (2015) and Nichols (2011), as the equal opportunity of choice leads to the conflict of the pockets. As the democratic society must allow for equal opportunity of choice, which gives the space for pockets of alternate ideals to grow, the weakness of the democratic systems and structures lies within its strength – the people who have the agency.

In the antihero and hero-turned-villain narratives, the pockets of alternate ideals are visible through organised crime, illegal organisations performing experimental treatments, and a school where the headmaster has all the power. These pockets are the instability posing the threats to the overall democracy, which a strong society must have the ability to mitigate. The question is: whose responsibility is it to consolidate these threats when the systems and structures must allow them to foster? The antihero narrative suggested that it is the citizens' responsibility, as he refuses to accept the pockets he encounters. This result aligns with T. Giddens' (2015) argument that the hero is someone who steps in to act where the systems fail

to protect the people. This shows that the systems and structures cannot be completely entrusted with protecting the people, but that the people must also be aware and act when they encounter pockets, even if that entails themselves being punished for it. The hero-turned-villain narrative could instead be seen as communicating that the pockets must be fought using the means available in a democratic society, because if someone counters the pockets through other means they can potentially use the same methods for their personal interest, which would instead legitimise the pockets and thus, according to Mouffe (2000), grant them power.

The strength of society is also exemplified through how the characters perceive who is the villain in the narratives. As the hero-turned-villain transitions to a villain, he starts to disagree with the hero in the story on whom the real villain is, suggesting that a stable society needs to agree on who the enemy is. This is supported by the narratives of the villain-turned-hero and the hero. When the villain-turned-hero emerges as a hero, he does so by joining the hero of his story in a fight against a common outside enemy. In the hero narrative, the hero sets aside his differences with the law enforcement to fight together against the outside villains. Therefore, this analysis indicates that a strong society needs a common enemy to fight to be able to consolidate the conflicts within society. This is interesting considering Mouffe's (2000) idea of conflict within democracies, as she states that democracies must be agnostic, allow for legitimate opponents, but not antagonistic, allow enemies which destroy each other. The analysis agrees with this statement that a society cannot allow antagonistic conflicts within itself, but further suggests that society still needs an outside antagonist to be able to rally the people and convince them to legitimise the power systems they submit to and accept the agnostic relationships within their society.

If the narratives are considered to portray how society fights an outside threat instead of an opposing idea within the boundaries of society, it also adds new perspectives to the criticism of the defender of the status quo as being a nondemocratic superhero (Dittmer, 2005; Dittmer, 2007; Muñoz-González, 2017; Phillips & Strobl, 2006). The superhero narratives could from this new perspective be considered as fighting a threat against democracy, and if the status quo which is defended is a democracy, the defence of the status quo by the heroes should not be labelled as something negative.

In this analysis, the hero, acting in a democracy, used his resources to become a resource for society himself by activating others' agency to participate in solving the conflict. Thus, he

continued to practice democracy through his actions, which is what democracy's survival depends on (Dahl, 1998). This aligns with Barringer's (2020) results showing how a superhero narrative can be democratic by allowing everyone to use their agency and resources to fight the villain. The hero in this study can thereby be considered as an example of how to counter threats to the democratic status quo through active citizenship to keep society strong. This suggests that a strong society, which can handle the threats, does not need a strong benevolent guardian to save it, but a people consisting of active citizens who continue to practice democracy no matter what.

The analysis included two examples of benevolent guardianships that were challenged by malevolent guardians in the villain and the villain-turned-hero narratives. Since the guardianships were formed around one strong leader, the analysis showed how that also enables someone else to overtake the guardian role and abuse that power. The conflicts in these narratives were solved by a benevolent guardian stepping in to defeat the malevolent one, to restore the system to work according to the people's wishes. This result from the analysis aligns with the previous research, which considered the hero as someone with exceptional status who saves the people (Adams et al., 2020; Bainbridge, 2015; Gavaler, 2016; Halevy & Cooper, 2016; Maruo-Schröder, 2018). Consequently, the analysis aligns with Gadon's (2013) arguments as it suggests the danger of the people counting on a benevolent guardian to save them, because what happens to society if no benevolent guardian comes to the rescue? If the people in guardianships continue to practice guardianship, based on the belief that someone benevolent will come, they also continue to give the malevolent guardian power by default. This promise of a benevolent saviour for the guardianship society in the narratives covered in this analysis suggests that there is no need for people in guardianships to act to change society because guardianship can always restore itself to benevolence when the benevolent guardian arises. This hope that guardianships will fix themselves through a benevolent guardian emphasises the difference between guardianship and democracy. In guardianships the people must rely on what is believed to be the competent minority to make decisions for them, while democracy relies on the practice of the people (Dahl, 1998), meaning that the point of democracy in comparison to the guardianship is that the people are the ones in power and therefore must use their agency to continue to practice democracy according to their own will. Therefore, while guardianship can be either malevolent or benevolent, depending on the guardian, there is no malevolent democracy,

there is just democracy.

8.2 Limitations of study and suggestions for future research

This study offers an understanding of how democracy, and other political ideals, can be produced and reproduced through characters in the superhero genre. Though its results cannot be directly applied to other genres or across popular culture overall, it serves as an indication of how democracy is constructed in popular culture. And while the study does not cover any potential effect of the narratives on the fans, it does provide answers to how the texts they engage with communicate about democracy and what it means to be a hero or a villain.

For several of the characters there is a risk that new films or television series are released to expand the narrative, concerning the antihero Wade's narrative as a third film has been announced, the villain N'Jadaka's narrative as a sequel to *Black Panther* is scheduled for release in late 2022, and the villain-turned-hero Loki's narrative as he has variants appearing in other parts of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This could change the character's narratives by adding new scenes. However, this does not affect the result of this study as it still covers the transitioning or transmutating features of each character. Instead, it makes the characters more interesting to study as it could potentially show how characters can move between being transitioning and transmutating, showing that this classification is not static either.

As mentioned in the literature review, the superhero narrative is transcultural and transmediatic, making it interesting to compare similar heroes and villains from different cultures to explore if there is a difference in how they interact with their society depending on which culture the characters originate from. Considering how democracy was covered in this study, it was noted that the two characters who did not act in the United States, Loki and N'Jadaka, acted in guardianships, therefore it should be further explored how the conditions of characters and the pockets of alternate ideals are presented differently depending on where they are geographically connected to. Such studies could contribute to understanding of how political ideals are presumed to work in different cultural contexts.

The analysis indicated that democracy and popular culture are fields that together have room for further exploration. While it began to cover the hyper-textuality of the superhero narrative through several characters in the same media, future research could focus on one character

and analyse their interaction with society across different mediums, such as films, television series, comic books, and cartoons to understand how the narratives' transmediatic feature influences their portrayal of society. This would provide more insights into how they change depending on both their fictional context, the context of the medium, and the interaction between the narratives and the contemporary current events. These types of analyses could also include the pockets of alternate ideals, to see how they are expressed differently depending on the context of the narratives.

9. Conclusion

The study aimed to understand how democracy is communicated in superhero narratives as transmuting or transitioning using political philosophy. The analysis showed that not all characters are acting in democratic conditions, instead, some are acting in guardianships or democracies with pockets of alternate ideals. This is important because the conditions of the characters' actions influenced how they were enabled or constrained to emerge as either villains or heroes in their respective societies. In their respective conditions, the villains produced society as threatened by individuals who abuse the systems and structures surrounding them, while the hero instead uses their agency to unlock the participation of the surrounding people to win the fight against the threatening villain.

The transmutating democracy was portrayed as able to reform the citizens, influencing them to use their resources to continue to practice democracy no matter how great or small their available resources are. The transitioning democracy instead occurred when individuals choose to use their resources to start producing other political ideals in democracy, creating the pockets of alternate ideals. In a strong democratic society, these pockets are allowed to occur but are also mitigated through the people's enforcement of the structures by using their available resources. However, this study suggests the necessity of the people's common understanding of who the society's antagonist is to be able to mitigate the pockets, only then can the people see past their differences to fight the outside villain to save society. Therefore, a strong democratic society is not necessarily united in the fight for democracy but rather in the fight against alternative ideals. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each individual in a democracy to constantly use their agency to practice the democratic society to keep it from transitioning into something else, because the point of democracy is that the people have the power. And with that great power, there must also come great responsibility.

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Appendix 1: Chart over stages in the character narratives (the hero's journey)

Chart over stages of the hero's journey. N/A means not applicable, meaning that the stage was not present in the narrative; the stages moments of decisions are marked green.

	Hero	Villain	Hero-turned-villain	Villain-turned-hero	Antihero
Films	*The amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), *Spider-Man: No way home* (2021)	*Black Panther* (2018)	*The dark knight* (2008), *The dark knight rises* (2012)	*Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Thor: The dark world* (2013), *Thor: Ragnarök* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity war* (2018)	*Deadpool* (2016), *Deadpool 2* (2018)
Call to adventure	Peter, an orphan high school student, sneaks into the Oscorp lab to get answers about his deceased father's research. There he is bitten by a mutated spider which gives him his Spider-Man powers. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	N'Jadaka lives in the US where his father is killed by his brother, the king of Wakanda, for treason as he was radicalised and helped criminal Klau to steal vibranium (a rare metal) and weapons from Wakanda. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Harvey, a district attorney in Gotham, fails to convict a mob boss, when a witness decides to lie under oath, and instead tries to kill Harvey. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki, a prince on Asgard, learns that he is not the biological son of Odin, king of Asgard, but was taken from another planet, Jotunheim, and the frost giants as a baby. This means that he has no birthright to the throne and will therefore never be king, while Thor will be king. (*Thor*, 2011)	Wade, who works as a mercenary, and is in a relationship with the prostitute Vanessa, is diagnosed with terminal cancer. (*Deadpool*, 2016)
Call to adventure is rejected	After his uncle Ben is murdered, Peter decides to use his powers to hunt for the criminal who killed his uncle. This puts him into conflict with the police. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	N/A	N/A	Loki lets Laufey the frost giant, his biological father, into Asgard knowing he will try to kill Odin. This trespassing of Laufey into Asgard is used by Loki to start a war on Jotunheim, Laufey's home, to prove himself worthy of Asgard's throne. (*Thor,* 2011) Odin rejects Loki's pleads to recognise him as worthy of the throne. Loki then chooses to fall into oblivion, leaving Asgard behind. (*Thor,* 2011)	N/A
Assistance	Peter is invited to Gwen Stacy's house for dinner. When he is there, he reveals to her that he is Spider-Man after he has argued with her father, Captain Stacy, about Spider-Man's motives. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	N'Jadaka works with Klau to steal valuable African artifacts, such as weapons made from vibranium, from cultural museums in the West. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Harvey is assisted by Batman who captures corrupt accountant Lau in China for him, so he can prosecute him for his crimes in Gotham. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki is gifted a sceptre with the mind stone, making him able to brainwash people. He is also granted control over the extra-terrestrials the Chitauri by a follower of Thanos. With these, Loki will be able to rule Earth, in exchange he will retrieve the tesseract, containing the space stone, for Thanos, giving him control over the	Wade agrees to the experimental treatment of his cancer, leaving Vanessa so she does not have to see him die. He is injected with a mutant serum and his mutant genes are triggered through being tortured by Ajax, which gives him healing powers, cures his cancer, and disfigures him. (*Deadpool*, 2016)

				universe. (*The Avengers*, 2012)	
Passing the first threshold	Dr. Connors turns into the lizard and terrorises the people on a bridge in New York. Peter arrives as Spider-Man, but instead of going after the lizard, Peter decides to save a child in danger of falling off the bridge. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	N'Jadaka wants to go to Wakanda and reveals to Klau that he is Wakandian and therefore they will let him in. Klau refuses and N'Jadaka ends up killing both his girlfriend and Klau to be able to go. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	The Joker has named Harvey as one of his targets. All the other targets are killed, while Harvey is saved from the Joker as Batman intervenes. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki arrives on Earth, fights the US governmental organisation SHIELD upon his arrival and brainwashes some of their staff, such as future avenger Hawkeye, so they all help him retrieve the space stone and invade Earth. (*The Avengers*, 2012)	Wade finds out that Ajax has kidnapped Vanessa, his girlfriend whom he has not returned to because of his deformity. Now he must save her. (*Deadpool*, 2016)
Rebirth	Peter, as Spider-Man, is captured by the police and Captain Stacy. The captain takes off the mask and recognises him as his daughter's boyfriend. Peter convinces him to let him go to be able to save the city. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	N'Jadaka is arrested upon his arrival in Wakanda, though he has brought Klau's dead body as a gift to the people. He is taken to the counsel where he reveals his identity and that he wants to challenge King T'Challa for the throne; the challenge is accepted. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Gordon is protecting the mayor of Gotham and is therefore shot by the Joker, who is aiming for the mayor. Harvey talks to a suspect of the shooting, asking him for information about the Joker; Harvey kidnaps the suspect when he refuses to talk (*The dark knight*, 2008)	After Loki is captured by the Avengers, he is brought to custody in an aircraft military base. But he plans to release the Hulk in the aircraft, which he does with the help of the people he brain-washed. As Loki escapes, he kills SHIELD agent Coulson, who states that Loki will lose because he lacks conviction. (*The Avengers*, 2012)	Wade cannot face Ajax alone, so he asks for help from his X-men friends Colossus and Negasonic, whom he has rejected before. They agree, and in return he will consider joining the X-men. (*Deadpool*, 2016)
Trials	Peter heads to Oscorp, where Gwen is assisting him in making an antidote to cure Dr. Connors and others from being lizards. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	N'Jadaka fights T'Challa for the throne and wins, killing Zuri who proclaims his responsibility for N'Jadaka's father's death and supposedly killing T'Challa.	Harvey tortures the suspect and threatens to kill him if he does not give him information about the Joker. Batman stops Harvey from killing the suspect, who is just a mentally ill admirer of the Joker, saying that Harvey needs to be the hero for Gotham, which Batman cannot be. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki is defeated by the Avengers and fails in his attempt to take over Earth. (*The Avengers*, 2012)	After defeating Ajax, Colossus tries to convince Wade to spare Ajax life and become a hero. He argues that you do not have to be a hero all the time, only when it really matters, as in the moment of deciding to kill an enemy or to spare their life. Wade decides to kill Ajax. (*Deadpool*, 2016)
	On his way there he is assisted by the father of the child whom he saved on the bridge earlier, the father works in construction and instructs his colleagues to position their crane so Spider-Man can easily swing from them to the Oscorp building. (*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)		Batman decides to give up, but Harvey decides to instead publicly claim he is Batman. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Thor takes him back to Asgard where he is sentenced to life in prison by Odin for his crimes on Earth. If it were not for Frigga, Loki's mother, Loki would have been killed. Once again, Odin renounces Loki's birthright to the throne, or any throne. (*Thor: The dark world*, 2013)	
Meeting with the guide	After Dr. Connors is defeated, Peter speaks with Captain Stacy, who has been fatally injured during his fight with Dr. Connors. The Captain recognises the need for Spider-Man, but makes Peter promise to keep Gwen out of his life, for her safety.	After his win, N'Jadaka performs the ritual where he is put in a dreamlike state where he meets his father in their old apartment in the United States. His father states that he wished to take N'Jadaka to Wakanda one day to see the sunsets, but he fears that N'Jadaka	Harvey is arrested for the crimes of Batman. Rachel meets with him and tries to convince him to tell the truth. She says that his sacrifice does not ensure the Joker's capture and that Gotham needs Harvey. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Frigga, his adoptive mother, visits Loki in prison, showing her care for him, though stating that it is Loki's own actions that led him to prison. If he wants to be a king, he must take responsibility for his actions. Loki renounces his father and mother in anger, but	Wade reunites with Vanessa and shows her his deformed face. She decides that she still wants him. (*Deadpool*, 2016)

	(*The amazing Spider-Man*, 2012)	won't be welcome there. He is also sad to see what N'Jadaka has become. (*Black Panther*, 2018)		Frigga states that Loki is perceptive about everyone but himself. Loki seeks comfort in his mother, but she leaves him. (*Thor: The dark world*, 2013)	
False ending	Peter balances his life as Spider-Man, helping the police in capturing criminals, while also having a personal life in which he is graduating from high school (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	N'Jadaka burns all the herbs from the ritual so no one can meet their ancestors again and so no one else can get the powers of the Black Panther, protector of Wakanda, after him. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Harvey and Rachel are kidnapped and put in separate locations, both with explosives around them. Harvey believes that Rachel will be saved, but instead he is and Rachel dies. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki fakes his death as he saves Thor from being killed by the Dark Elves, giving himself a heroic death. He then moves on to take over the throne, disguised as Odin. (*Thor: The dark world*, 2013)	Wade is working as an international assassin of "mass-murderers, gangsters and monsters", and is still together with Vanessa, with whom he wants to start a family. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)
Atonement	Electro causes panic on Times Square, so Peter confronts him as Spider-Man. He tries to resolve the conflict peacefully and is almost successful, when the police start shooting at Electro, causing a violent conflict. After Electro is captured, Peter questions Gwen's choice to move away from him to Oxford, realising that then he cannot be Spider-Man and with Gwen. (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	N'Jadaka orders the Wakandian forces to provide their spies, and in extension the suppressed African diaspora, with vibranium weapons, so he can build a Wakandian empire on Earth. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Gordon visits Harvey in the hospital. Harvey is angry because they saved him and not Rachel. He reminds Gordon that he and his colleagues used to believe that Harvey was two-faced. Harvey states that Gordon will pay for the pain he has caused Dent. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	After Loki's disguise is revealed, he and Thor visit a dying Odin on Earth. In his final moments, Odin refers to them both as his sons and tells him that he loves them both. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	After Vanessa is killed, Wade joins the X-men as an intern. They go on a mission to a school where a mutant boy, Russell, is threatening everyone with his powers. Russell tells Wade that he is being tortured at the school, so starts killing the school staff, instead of choosing to be an X-men hero. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)
Elevation	Peter is asked by his childhood friend Harry Osborn to get him Spider-Man's blood to cure his illness, as he believes Peter knows Spider-Man. But Peter decides that he cannot have Spider-Man's blood, as it might cause him to turn into something evil, like Dr. Connors. He says that he is trying to protect Harry by not saving him. (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	When his orders are met with reluctance by some in Wakanda, both spies and parts of the militia, N'Jadaka decides to start providing weapons to those who are willing to accept them, ignoring his advisors. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Joker visits Harvey in the hospital. He argues that Harvey has failed to achieve his goals by working legally, and that he will never achieve them that way. Instead, he should deviate from his plans, and introduce chaos, because chaos is fair. Joker gives Harvey a coin to flip, deciding if he will kill Joker or not. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki visits Thor in the prison on the planet Sakaar. He tries to convince Thor to join forces with him to take over Sakaar, but Thor wants to go back and save Asgard. Loki thinks that is a bad idea since their sister Hela who has taken over Asgard is too powerful. Thor won't answer, but when Loki begs him to say something he lists the evil things Loki has done recently: faked his own death, took over the throne, stripped Odin of his power, stranded him on Earth and released Hela. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	Wade fights Cable, who wants to kill Russell, and dies. In the afterlife he sees Vanessa before he heals and is brought back to life. He realises he must save Russell in order to be with Vanessa. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)
Final gift	Peter reconciles with Gwen, telling her that he still loves her and that he will follow her to England and be Spider-Man there. She then instructs him on how to modify his web-shooters so he can successfully confront Electro. (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	T'Challa returns, meaning that the challenge over the throne is not complete. Upon T'Challa's arrival the head of security sides with N'Jadaka, even if Okoye points out to him that he can no longer be considered a rightful king. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Harvey Dent confronts the mob boss who he was unable to convict. But now Harvey is not looking to imprison the mob boss, but to find out who is responsible for Rachel's death. Now, the mob boss is afraid of Harvey's threats, as he flips a coin to	As Loki helps Thor to escape Sakaar, Loki states that he believes Thor hates him, but Thor then tells Loki that he used to admire him and that he hoped they would fight side by side forever. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	Wade asks Colossus for help to save Russell, despite having rejected him many times in the past. Colossus does not want to help. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)

			decide whether or not to kill him. (*The dark knight*, 2008)		
Refuse to change	N/A	N/A	Harvey threatens detective Ramirez, who is partly responsible for Rachel's death and gets her to lure Gordon's family to him. Then, he flips a coin on her life, not listening to her explaining that she was corrupted by the mob because of the debt from her mother's hospital bills etc. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki betrays Thor to get rewarded by the Grandmaster for capturing him. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	N/A
Magic flight	Peter goes into the city to find Electro who has caused a blackout, he is allowed to do it by the police force who help him with what he needs to fight Electro.	N'Jadaka is left to fight the special forces, called Dora Milaje, and Okoye, as T'Challa's allies try to stop N'Jadaka's orders of weapon export from being executed. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	While Harvey is being corrupted and kidnaps Gordon's family, the Joker distracts Batman so he can no longer save Harvey from his destiny. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Thor predicted that Loki would betray him and paralyses him with a tazor-weapon. Thor leaves Loki behind, saying that he wishes that Loki would grow and change. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	Wade and his allies arrive to confront Russell and save him from becoming a villain. But they must fight Russell's ally Juggernut to get to him. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)
Outside saviour	When Peter is losing against Electro, Gwen assists him by running Electro over with a car and then helping Peter turn the electricity in the city back on again. (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	N/A	Harvey decides to kill the person who Gordon loves most, holding a gun to the head of Gordon's son. Batman comes to reason with Harvey, saying that he, Harvey, and Gordon are the ones responsible for Rachel's death, and they should be punished, not the child.	Thor's friend Korg saves Loki, and they escape from Sakaar together. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	Wade sacrifices himself to save Russell, which leads Wade to get shot and killed by Cable. But Wade is resurrected by Cable when he realises that Wade successfully redeemed Russell and stopped him from becoming a villain. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)
Passing the return threshold	When Electro is defeated, Harry Osborn, who has now turned into the Green Goblin, appears. He realises that Spider-Man is Peter and therefore takes Gwen from him. Peter tries to fight Harry, while also trying to keep Gwen safe. He defeats Harry but is unable to save Gwen who falls to her death. (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	N'Jadaka and T'Challa argue over N'Jadaka's plan to build an empire. N'Jadaka states that he wants to use the oppressors' methods against them, beating them at their own game. T'Challa states that this has caused N'Jadaka to become an oppressor himself. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Batman says that the Joker wanted to prove that he could corrupt even the best of them. Harvey agrees with the Joker and flips the coin on Batman, shooting him. Then he flips the coin on himself, surviving, but before he can shoot Gordon's son Batman pushes him off the ledge and Harvey dies. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki returns to Asgard to evacuate the people and save them from being destroyed by Hela. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	Wade survives after having sacrificed himself to save Russell from being killed by Cable. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)
Finding balance	Peter returns as Spider-Man after five months of being overwhelmed with grief to save the city from the new villain, Rhino. (*The amazing Spider-Man 2*, 2014)	T'Calla strikes N'Jadaka with a deadly blow. Realising his defeat, N'Jadaka tells him about his admiration of Wakanda, prompting T'Challa to help him outside and he also offers to heal him. Though N'Jadaka refuses, he would rather die than end up imprisoned. He dies	After Harvey's death, Batman and Gordon decide to not let people know that he was corrupted and thus let him die a hero. Instead, Batman takes the blame for the crimes Harvey committed towards the end. (*The dark knight*, 2008)	Loki follows the lead of Thor in the fight against Hela, together they save the people of Asgard and let Hela be destroyed together with Asgard. He accepts Thor as the new king of Asgard. (*Thor: Ragnarok*, 2017)	The headmaster of the school where Russell was tortured professes his hate for mutants. Wade stops Cable from killing the headmaster, stating that they are better than that, knowing he will be run over and killed by his taxi driver friend. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)

		watching the sunset. (*Black Panther*, 2018)			
Freedom to live	Peter is thrown into a parallel universe where he aids the other Spider-Men in fighting villains, being able to save M.J. from facing a similar fate as Gwen. (*Spider-Man: No Way Home*, 2021)	T'Challa goes to the United States and starts a Wakandian outreach programme, offering social help and research exchange programmes in poor communities. The first is started in N'Jadaka's old neighbourhood. (*Black Panther*, 2018)	Harvey is remembered as Gotham's hero, while Batman is hunted for Harvey's crimes. (*The dark knight*, 2008) Harvey's name is used for the Dent Act, which enables the law enforcement to clean the streets of Gotham from criminality (*The dark knight rises*, 2012).	Loki tries to deceive Thanos to kill him and stop him from getting the infinity stones so he can rule the universe, but Thanos kills him. (*Avengers: Infinity war*, 2018).	Wade joins forces with both the villains (Russell and Cable) and the heroes (Colossus and Negasonic) and states that they are his family. (*Deadpool 2*, 2018)

Definition of stages (original name of stages in parenthesis):

Departure

Call to adventure (The call to adventure): Destiny has called the character to enter an uncertain sphere (p.52), a new stage in life (p. 50).

Call to adventure is rejected (Refusal of the call): The character tries to continue life as usual, but that leads them to become trapped in work, boredom, or a culture, which removes their agency (p. 53).

Assistance (Supernatural aid): When the call to adventure is accepted, the character is given a power to help them, either a new ability or an assisting character, in their fight against their opponents (p. 65).

Passing the first threshold (The crossing of the first threshold): The character reaches the border of the known sphere, where they meet a guarding force, which wants the character to stay on the known side of the border (p. 73). However, the hero's journey always entails crossing the border over to the unknown (p. 77).

Rebirth (Belly of the whale): A low point for the character, as they are assumed to have been defeated, but the character is just being reborn (p. 85), which gives the character the ability to move across the borders without fear (p. 88).

Initiation

Trials (The road of trials): The character faces new challenges in the unknown and is aided by the previously given powers (p. 91). The trials clarify and deepen the conflict from the first threshold (p. 100).

Meeting with the guide (Meeting with the goddess): The character meets someone who embodies the end of the journey and is reminded that a world in order still exists (p. 104). The character also receives new knowledge and guidance (p. 110).

False ending (Woman as temptress): The first tension from passing the threshold has been mastered (p. 115), and now the character hopes that the journey is completed (p. 116).

Atonement (Atonement with the father): The character sheds the idea of who they thought they were to become what they are (p.124) and is given radically different relations to the characters in the known sphere (p. 131).

Elevation (Apotheosis): The character realises that they are the saviour and must do what they want to get done (p. 155).

Final gift (The ultimate boon): The character searches and receives mercy or recognition from superior characters (p. 171).

Return

Refuse to change (Refusal of the return): The character doubts that they should return to their home to renew their society based on their new learnings (p. 185).

Magic flight (The magic flight): The crisis upon the return is surrounded either by the protection of the leaders from the unknown sphere or by the persecution from them (p. 189).

Outside saviour (Rescue from without): The known world aids the character in the crisis upon their return (p. 199).

Passing the return threshold (The crossing of the return threshold): The ideas from the known and unknown sphere clash (p. 216).

Finding balance (The master of the two worlds): The character can travel in both spheres in acceptance and without pitting them against each other (p. 221). The character returns to normal life (p. 232).

Freedom to live (Freedom to live): There is a resolution between the individual will and the universal will (p. 233).