

## Identifying Disabled Super Bodies: Finding the disabled in the Captain America trilogy

### Summary:

In this paper, I've used film to look at the movies *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War*, along with a handful of other relevant MCU projects using an intersectional disability focused lens, in an attempt to determine the connection between the character of Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers and the traits of disability they both share and display.

Core theoreticians for this text are Chivers and Markotic for their "problem body" term, McSweeney for his summary and application of the superhero genre, and Fraser to show the disconnect between disability in image and in narrative.

### Introduction:

Although what first drew me to wanting to analyze disability in pop-media was recognizing the pattern of hyper-functional, sci-fi magic prosthetics that have appeared on both big and small screens in modern times. Originally I planned a large assembly paper with as many prosthetic wielding action heroes as I could find collected under a microscope, but as this would've required a lot more resources than what's would be available to me, I decided to center myself around the highest profile ones of this collection: Bucky 'Winter Soldier' Barnes, the side-kick of Captain America. In this paper I will aim to identify where a character like Bucky belongs in the overarching plot of these films (along with some of the other MCU properties), using intersectional, but disability centered film theory, particularly focusing on the problem body, and how it becomes represented in a superhero narrative.

### **Methodology and Summary of the Captain America Trilogy:**

In my attempt to answer how the disabled heroes are defined in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, I will primarily perform a textual analysis of the Captain America trilogy (*The First Avenger*, *The Winter Soldier*, *Civil War*), though mentions will be made of the conclusions of some story arcs that are found in later spin-offs and event films (*Falcon & the Winter Soldier*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*), as this is just the nature of the storytelling beast that is the MCU. The decision to focus mainly on the trilogy comes from the fact that the MCU struggles to keep characters and themes consistent across numeric titles, but within them, such as with these three movies, this is less of a problem.

The focus of my analysis will be of what I consider the 4 cases of disability found in these movies. Steve Rogers amalgamation of disorders in the first arc of *The First Avenger*, Bucky Barnes' prosthetic arm and his PTSD, and lastly James Rhodes' dramatic paralyzation after the climactic airport fight in *Civil War*. I am not aiming in my analysis to morally judge the portrayal of any of these characters, nor the performance of the actors playing them.

*The First Avenger* first arc concerns Steve Roger, a young, short, weak, and generally sick man from Brooklyn, New York, and his frustrated attempts to join the US war effort in Europe during World War II. Due to his disabilities, he is rejected multiple times, but a Jewish-German immigrant doctor working for the military finds a quality in him that he considers invaluable in his project to create the ultimate soldier, and subjects Steve to state sanctioned experiment that turns him into Captain America. The second arc sees Steve go from labrat, to propaganda piece, to commanding captain of his own troop, where his friend Bucky Barnes serves as his second in command. Barnes had earlier been the big, strong friend carrying Steve through his childhood, but gladly steps aside to Steve's command, recognizing his heroic qualities. Second act ends with Steve failing to save Bucky during a mission, having to leave him behind for dead after a long fall. Third act sees Steve defeating the various super Nazis of the fictional Übermench cult Hydra, but failing to save his own life from a fate similar to Bucky, crashing an enormous plane into a icy wasteland to save the day. Post credits, we see him waking up in modern day New York.

*The Winter Soldier* concerns Steve's disillusionment with the post-9/11 politics of the United States. Faced with both a resurrected Hydra working in the shadows, Steve must also face his mirror in the titular Winter Soldier, a super soldier like himself used by Hydra, just as he's used by the US government. The Winter Soldier turns out to be Bucky, who survived his icy fall, only to lose an arm, his memory, and his autonomy. Film concludes with the two of them

fighting it out as representations of both Hydra and the US government collapses around them, and Bucky, still only barely in control of his own actions, saves Steve from the wreckage.

*Civil War* forces Captain America to go head to head with Iron Man in an ideological battle that splits the superhero community into two sides. On the sides of Tony Stark are those who accept governmental oversight over their actions as public figures, but Steve Rogers, likely still reeling from Hydra's actions in *The Winter Soldier*, wants to keep an iron grip over his autonomy. Central to this upcoming brawl is Bucky Barnes, who struggles to justify his own freedom considering Hydra's meddling with his mind, and his multiple "evil" actions he's unable to answer for. In the closing of the second act, in a scene mirroring again Bucky's fall in *The First Avenger*, commands from Tony Stark directly leads to the fall and injury of his own sidekick, James Rhodes (Bucky's full name is James Buchanan Barnes), after which Tony becomes apologetic and sympathetic to Steve's side. In the climax this is again twisted, as it is revealed that Bucky, without any control of these actions, was "responsible" for the death of Tony's parents, leading to the final fight, and break-up of the Avengers as a super group. Steve departs as Bucky is given treatment for his disabilities in secret, of his own volition and accord, in Wakanda.

### **Theory:**

When it comes to critically analyzing superheroes and their stories, Terence McSweeney states that Peter Coogan serves the most valuable (McSweeney, 2020, 18). Coogan uses 3 categories when analyzing and identifying superheroes: Powers, a hero's special ability, which often sets them apart from the common citizen; identity, containing the hero's costume, name(s) and identifying iconography; and mission, which Coogan describes as a "selfless and pro-social", intending to serve a greater goal than that of the character's own selfish desires (McSweeney, 2020, 20-24). Important to mention here that what is described as "selfless and pro-social" in Coogan's term "mission" is subjective to the norms of the culture it is made in and for. As Asa Berger writes "There is a fairly close relationship, generally, between a society and its heroes; if a hero does not espouse values that are meaningful to his readers, there seems little likelihood that he will be popular." (McSweeney, 2020, 39). If this comment holds water, we should be able to assume qualities shown by a hero in a popular hero-film, such as one springing multiple sequels and spin-off franchises, would also be reflected, shared or considered valuable by its audience.

McSweeney directly comments on Captain America in particular, when he states that superheroes are elevated from the ordinary, such as puny Steve Rogers before being subjected to the super serum (McSweeney, 2020, 40), but also mentions that he (and other heroes like him) are already separated from the normal by an inner quality before anything super happens to them.

McSweeney also suggests that a possible larger reason for the bump in superhero film relates to the advances in cgi and other special effects, which allows for a much greater diversity on the screen (McSweeney, 2020, 110). Unlike comics, which is where most of these stories were originally penned, film is limited in what images they can portray, at least in terms of a character's body.

When describing the necessity of disability analysis and critique, the topic of gaze comes up. Gaze is first described by Laura Mulvey in “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema” in relation to feminist film theory, and is commonly known in that context as male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). There she concludes that women don’t just serve as a character in and of themselves, but also as a voyeuristic or fetishized object (not just sexually fetishized, but that as well).

Similarly Chivers argues that a similar relationship exists in portraying disabled bodies in film (Chivers, 2010, 4). As an example of this being spun, Chivers uses a skit from *Kids in the Hall*, where a variety of fake Oscar nominated clips of abled actors playing diverse disabled characters, not as a form of representation, but to serve as the (imagined) movie’s moral lesson. “I’m not the one that’s handicapped. [points to the crowd] YOU’RE the ones that are handicapped . . . IN HERE! [points to his heart].” (Chivers, 2010, 5-8).

The term Chivers and Markotic named their essay collection on, the “problem” body, was another term first used in feminist discussion. This term is proposed by them to be used as a comparison and contrast to other analyzing terms such as the “extraordinary” body, the “rejected” body or similar (Chivers, 2010, 8-9). In their usage, the problem body incorporates representations of various disabled bodies, and although all their examples are of physical disabilities (and disability related groups, such as obese and aged bodies), they do explain that this term is meant to emphasize the transformation of physical difference into cultural patterns of spectacle, tropes, and how such tropes can have harmful effects.

The “problem” part of the problem body comes from Michel Foucault’s problematic, which is lifted from the subjectivity that comes from scientific power structures, which divides the body (and mind) into the classifications “the disabled” and “the normal” (or “the sane” and “the mad”). In their collection, Chivers and Markotic aims to challenge these outside looks that separates the normal and the disabled, but also invite critical responses that recognize this dichotomy as constructed (Chivers, 2010, 10).

Benjamin Fraser also aims to have academics view disability, not purely as a part of its own field of study, but to be seen as a part of a global, international system (Fraser, 2016, 2). He sees it as problematic for disability to be, among other things, filtered through the lens of a medical model (Fraser, 2016, 6).

In his essay on the movie *The Big Parade*, Timothy Barnard notes the way the film causes the legs of the main character to become sort of a character on their own, through framing, mise-en-scène, editing and acting, which only becomes more noticeable once the main character replaces one of those legs with a wooden prosthetic (Chivers, 2010, 29-32). Barnard also comments on, though the film is silent, it carries itself through the rhythm of the characters’ gaits (Chivers, 2010, 33-34). The mechanized military and wartime becomes identified with the droning march of wartime, while the jazz-like, prosthetic leaning gait of the finale becomes a symbol of peace and potential love.

In Barnard’s eyes, amputees and prosthetics became signs of service, sacrifice and the most visible postwar sign of veterancy (Chivers, 2010, 35), and with *The Big Parade*, this resulted in a new postwar masculinity, one where demasculinization wouldn’t be the end of a romanceable man.

Bernard concludes in his essay, similarly to the film's director, that *The Big Parade* is a clashing contrast of both the melodramatic and realistic, accented by the contrast of the portrayed original and the prosthetic leg.

Film, the same as most visual mediums such as photography, painting, sculptures and the comics Captain America stems from, have historically been focused on representing bodies (Fraser, 2016, 5). It is closer to photography still, where the picture is an accurate/photorealistic representation of reality. Fraser uses a quote from Pier Paolo Pasolini "if we see in the sublime *Man of Aran* a woman and a boy on the rocks, we recognize them because the cognitive code of reality as such comes into play" (Fraser, 2016, 5).

Cinematic representation also holds, in addition to the direct representation of the image, a possibility for symbolic signification (Fraser, 2016, 7). Films symbolic signification is tied to the social convention and history along with a viewer's interpretation, making the dissection of symbolic meaning more challenging as one crosses borders from where the film was produced to where it was consumed. A disconnect between narrative and image/form like this has in media pop film writing been referred to as a "cinemanarrative dissonance" (as a contrast to a game's "ludonarrative dissonance") (Folding Ideas, 2018, 03:19)

### **Analysis:**

If we use Coogan's three main categories of power, identity and mission and apply them to Steve and Bucky, it becomes clear that they are mirrors of each other. Their power sets are almost identical, both being super soldiers with increased physical prowess, weapon finesse, and tactical know-how. The biggest difference here is Bucky's prosthetic arm, which, due to the plot's loose defining of its durability, can be considered a handicap as it is a boon, at least until he gets a nigh-indestructible vibranium upgrade in a *Black Panther* post-credit scene, though this may be seen as an other mirror of Steve, who also has a vibranium shield as one of his main iconic pieces of gear. After all, one of the main actions Bucky performs with his metal arm that would be rather inconvenient with a flesh one, is to shield his face from gunfire or other lethal dangers .

Similarly to their powers, they also have a lot of identity signifiers in common. Both are men from a bygone era, blasted from the past to the present without memory of the time in between. And they both journey from being puppets of a spy network, to being free agents on the run from a global machine intent on capturing them. They also share very recognizable iconography, as they can both be identified with a large white-on-red or red-on-white star (Steve on his shield, Bucky on his Hydra arm), though these stars symbolize entirely different things diegetically (The US' stars and stripes, versus a red star recognized as a communist, therefore Russian, symbol).

Lastly they both share what I consider the core mission statement of these movies: To help those less able than themselves, be it to serve as protection, or to help empower them to regain their autonomy. This should clearly establish Bucky and Steve's relationship and dynamic, at least using superhero terms, as the sidekick and the hero.

Extrapolating further from Coogan's idea of the hero's mission being a selfless and pro-social quality, and from Berger's idea that what's seen as heroic in superhero media has to be appealing to an audience to stay popular, we can then assume that Bucky's "standing up for the little guy (who in this case is little due to a vast array of disabilities)" becomes not just the heroic creed of Captain America, but core to the appeal of the trilogy as a film series (Superduo, 2020, 00:35). Similarly, Steve's "I can do this all day" dialogue and attitude towards confronting bullies larger and more able (of violence) than himself becomes repeated in the climax of the trilogy, *Civil War*, as he faces Tony Stark, and his technological wondersuit, who threatens to harm an unconscious Bucky (Superduo, 2020, 2:00). Based on this, I must agree with McSweeney's assessment of "puny" Steve Rogers, in that what is his most heroic quality and mission was displayed before he became super. This makes Captain America a fairly typical, stoic example of a superhero, which we'll see later is in strong contrast to his *Civil War* rival, Iron Man.

Within *Civil War*, a similar hero/sidekick dynamic is seen between Tony Stark and James Rhodes. Both are empowered by futuristic mech armor. Both have a begrudging (and later discarded) relationship with the world governments. And both share the goal of stopping Steve from saving Bucky. As Tony serves as closer to an antagonist in this movie than a hero, I would argue that his mission doesn't have to serve as selfless as per Coogan's idea, but rather a selfish one. A descriptor for Tony's mission in this movie I would say instead is compartmentalizing for the sake of his selfish desires. First to keep his surrogate family (the Avengers group) together, but later to avenge his original family, which was killed by the Winter Soldier. This matches Tony's portrayal in the *Iron Man* and *Avengers* films, where his heroics have always been framed and constrained by his selfishness (Kyle Kallgren, 2015, 3:18). As a "villain", Tony is served his "comeuppance" when his fate mirrors that of Steve in *The First Avenger*, and he is forced to watch his best friend plunge towards his certain disability.

Considering McSweeney's theory that superhero film has become so prevalent in modern times due to advances in special effects, it is easy to understand that it is special effects that allows Josh Brolin to be transformed into the mad, purple, titan Thanos. And in a similar way, special effects allow for a bigger diversity of ability among the characters displayed by otherwise abled actors. Although Sebastian Stan himself doesn't have a need to use a prosthetic arm, special effects have allowed him to portray a Bucky Barnes, which is seen in the MCU with both a flesh, steel, vibranium and missing arm, without losing any of his real limbs in the process. Similarly these films allow the mountain of a man that is Chris Evans to portray a person a third his own body mass for the first arc of *The First Avenger*, through effects that likely included a lot more CGI than Stan's prosthetic arm. Some elements from the comics do not adapt as easily though, it seems. As noted by TV Tropes, it is a common gag for Bucky's Winter Soldier arm to become busted very often, but across all the films he's been in, it only happens once in the MCU (unless we count the time when the Dora Milaje disconnects his Wakandan arm in the Disney Plus spin-off) (TV Tropes, 2023, Adaptational Badass).

In my summary, I identified 4 core cases of disability in this trilogy, contained within 3 "bodies". Firstly is Steve's asthma etc. package from *The First Avenger*, lastly Rhodes' paralysis at the end of *Civil War*, but most complexly is Bucky's dismemberment and PTSD. I write PTSD, although his symptoms are unlikely a 1-to-1 match with modern psychiatry's

understanding of the term. Bucky has a complex, plot relevant mental disorder inflicted on him which is difficult for an amateur like me to identify, but includes amnesia, blackouts and loss of autonomy (susceptibility to mind control).

Similarly to how Jim's feet in *The Big Parade* is given special treatment by the director, Bucky's arm in *The Winter Soldier* and *Civil War* is shown some love that has not gone unnoticed by the fanbase (T.A.G, 2021). Bucky's most prominent move when in close combat to be to demonstrate his literal and figurative iron grip, and choke grab his opponents. In these moments, similarly to how King Vidor's use of "silent music" evoked the death of war and the life of peace, the sound and movement of Bucky's arm carries symbolic meaning with it. Especially in choking scenes from *The Winter Soldier* can you see and hear the whirring movement of the mechanism, and you can see the plates and artificial muscles "pulsate" (T.A.G, 2021, 0:06), audiovisually representing bucky's lack of control over his actions. He is just a Hydra killing machine in these moments, more machine than man, to quote a different Disney property. So even though these audiovisual elements serve to express Bucky's physical disability, they're still connected to his mental illness and PTSD.

Attempting to identify the "problem bodies" in this film, I chose to interpret it as follows: Steve's problem body is easy to identify, as the film makes it clear that his pre-serum body doesn't qualify for society's expectations of a soldier. As a result, Steve's body is only a "problem" body during the first act of *The First Avenger*, but becomes more a "normal body" as Foucault would have named it (though it can be argued that there should be a "super abled body" category when discussing this genre). Rhodes is similarly easy to spot, as a scene at the end of *Civil War* is dedicated to his physiotherapy and new prosthetic exoskeleton. It is problematic that he, a superhero, now needs extensive training and equipment to stay upright, and though sci-fi technology compensates his recovery, this technology is firstly not dissimilar to real theoretical prosthetics, and secondly not a replacement for his disabled body. Brody is still recognizably physically paralyzed at the end of this movie (and thematically carries this thread into his character's next MCU appearance in *Avengers: Endgame*). Bucky is, however, harder to dissect like this. His body is, after the reassembly by Hydra, fully functional and "normal". There is nothing he can't do with his prosthetic arm that he couldn't with his flesh one if he still had it. Indeed, his body alone is arguably superabled with the prosthetic. What is easier to argue, however, is that Bucky has a "problematic" mind, which is then what the movies decide to focus on over his physical disabilities. It is notable that his PTSD coincides with him being armed with the Winter Soldier arm provided by Hydra. Once he recovers in Wakanda, he is gifted a new arm there, likely symbolic of his recovery.

I see a connection between Mulvaney's gaze theory, and the trilogy's need to have Steve and Bucky in fighting condition. It seems Marvel wants to have films about disability, and veterans recovering from war and returning to civic life, leaving herodotom behind, but the demands of the genre requires big, abled bodies for all the action scenes. This feels like the reason why *The First Avengers* is a story, not about a puny man overcoming his disability with determination and chutzpah, but rather a puny man that upgrades to a beefcake man that fights Nazis with abs and pecks, chutzpah served on the side. This feels like why Bucky, even when disarmed, is given a perfect sci-fi arm over a realistic cold war prosthetic, because punching (and saving budget on effects) trumps theme. Instead he is loaded with a mental disorder cocktail that allows for as much representation as possible within one

character without interrupting their ability to kick ass during explosion scenes, leaving any physical disability representation to have to piggyback off of any symbolism carried by the mental disability. To me, these decisions come across as every bit as voyeuristic and fetishistic as Mulvaney describes the assumed male gaze, which I will dub the abled gaze. It is not necessarily the prioritization of mental over physical disability that is the cause of contention here, but rather the assumed abled viewer's assumed ability to relate more to a mentally troubled character than one that is physically troubled.

This is an issue pointed out by multiple of the theoreticians I've used in this text (Bernard, Fraser, Markotic), where there is a disconnect between the truth of the narrative and the symbology, and the truth of the picture we are being shown. The narrative tells us that Bucky is a very damaged, nearly demented, disabled century old man, but the image we are shown is of a soldier in his prime, equipped with state of the art weaponry, and more capable than any man we're likely to meet in our reality. I would consider this a form of cinemanaarrative dissonance, caused by willingness by abled creatives to forgo the symbolism of the disabled, without risking the gratification of the assumed abled viewer. A dissonance like this is likely not noticeable for those not tuned in to the disability subtext, something that might make the decision to overgo subtext over the potential gratification of a(n assumed abled) viewer all the more creatively tempting.

Unlike in *The Big Parade*, where a disconnect between the melodramatic and the realistic served us a conclusion in which disability wasn't discarded as a pure tragedy, but instead created a new example of a new emasculated masculine, and turned the disabled veteran into a romantic hero as well as a symbol of the prize paid to win the war. I do not see the disability themes of the *Captain America* trilogy being able to claim such a thematic conclusion, at least not within these films.

As of writing, even though Chris Evans has retired from the MCU, Bucky Barnes and other characters from these movies have yet to conclude their arc within this decades spanning project. In Bucky's last adventure, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, disability themes are continued, possibly even given more focus than the 2 hour 30 minute movies previously would allow. He is seen given forced therapy, which contrasts to the treatment Bucky willingly undergoes at the end of *Civil War*, and this new treatment is scoffed at, and seems ineffective in contrast, being unable to rid him of the guilt he feels for actions as Hydra's agent. Perhaps, in the inevitable 4th *Captain America* film, Barnes will be allowed to rest. He is practically a world class geezer at this point.

### **Conclusion:**

It is clear to me, after these viewings, that a portrayal of disability was important to Kevin Feige and the other creative leads when making these movies. The narrative of Steve requires that he comes from a less-than background, and the language of disability is used throughout the trilogy. This language is what evokes Captain America's heroism. His willingness to keep fighting the odds and bullies, and his past disability and future disability-sympathy forms our sympathetic bond to the character. His near obsession with helping his ailing friend, though he has to stand against the very institutions that rebirthed him serves as his core motivation in the sequel films. However, the films shies away from truly portraying the "problematic" body, as with both Steve and Bucky, sci-fi magic gets



utilized to turn their otherwise disabled bodies into that of battle-ready action men, to the benefit of assumed abled viewers.

Meanwhile, the only truly “problematic” body at the end of this narrative, James Rhodes, belonged to a character who was struck down like Icarus for the hubris of his best friend. At least the tension of this narrative thread is undercut in what by now is known as a classic MCU move: A meta cameo from the larger franchise, who ends the scene with some low-brow humor.

What there is to find of disability subtext (and to be honest, there is quite a lot), gets delegated to mental disorders and melodramatic narrative, where a conclusion is reached by whoever lands the last bloody-knuckled haymaker. As superhero action conclusions go, it probably feels correct, but in terms of a satisfying, disability-centric cinema, it doesn't quite hit the mark. Though I guess it is a story nearly a century in the making.

As to how Bucky, and his disabilities, fits into this trilogy's narrative, it all depends on the angle you're looking at it. Narratively serves as Steve's mirror, his side-kick, his shadow and rival, his damsel in distress. Primarily he informs the viewer of the films' themes of heroism through altruism and self-sacrifice, even before Steve does, and at the end, it is his autonomic decision to go under, frozen into the ice, and cleared of all Hydra programming. Though, in truth, he does also end up being another beefy guy that looks cool hitting the other beefy guys, as these hero flicks tend to do.

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