

# **‘We Are Not Things’: Infertility, Reproduction, and Rhetoric of Control in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Mad Max: Fury Road***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Pregnancy occupies an uncertain position in Hollywood cinema, and discussions of infertility are notably absent. Indeed, two blockbusters (*Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*) invested in the politics and rhetoric of reproduction met with disparate critical and popular opinion. This article will examine the potential reasons for this, whilst establishing ideological parity between the films.

## **KEYWORDS**

Pregnancy, Infertility, Gender, Whedon, *Mad Max*

If pregnancy’s centrality to feminist literature is evident, its significance in film is less so. Pregnancy was absent at cinema’s outset, then became associated with horror before becoming a central theme in the 1980s. Reproduction is a divisive issue, and its depictions on screen are complex, perhaps because ‘the pregnant body may be a screen for our fantasies and fears about ourselves’ (Oliver, 2012, 25): it is a source of cultural and social anxiety.

Pregnancy may be a source of anxiety, yet depictions of infertility are notably absent. Accordingly, this article will analyse reproduction and infertility narratives in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015). Whedon received backlash for his characterisation of Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow, (Scarlett Johansson) in *Age of Ultron*, whilst *Fury Road* has been praised for its brand of feminism. This article will problematise this dichotomy, using the narratives, industrial and authorial legacies, and the current feminist media context to determine why the films received such disparate reactions, and if they differ ideologically, or forward complementary commentary.

## **Hollywood and Pregnancy**

It is necessary to place discussion in the context of Hollywood cinema and reproduction. Reproduction is a contradiction: objectively, it is a biological imperative; however, it carries cultural and emotional baggage meaning debate around it devolves into entrenched ideologies. Perhaps this is attributable to reproduction’s significances: it is a “‘fact of life’” (Rapp 2001, 470), a ‘guarantee of a history’ (Doane 2000, 118), and a trigger for ‘anxieties about power, control [...] [and] humanity’ (Oliver 2012, 125). It is inherently ambiguous, deconstructing binaries; it is also almost exclusively the purview of women. This statement is not intentionally exclusionary: women are frequently reduced to the physical with their capacity, or desire, to have children taken as womanhood’s essence. Womanhood extends beyond this capacity or desire; however, for the purposes of this article, reproduction will be

addressed as a gendered issue as the physical act of pregnancy is undertaken, *most* of the time, by a biological, self-identifying woman.

Reproductive politics' centrality in feminist discourse is unsurprising: women are 'identified with the body rather than the mind' (Rapp 2001, 467). Women's roles 'as breeders and feeders' (ibid) are considered natural, ensuring 'we would have to shake the pillars of Nature Herself to seek [...] a re-division of labour' (ibid): a daunting task. This association explains why some feminists maintain women will only gain emancipation through a rejection of motherhood: de Beauvoir 'repeatedly warns women's reproductive function limits them' (Oliver 2012, 23), preventing participation in social and political spheres. One may wish to consider this view outdated, but it retains relevance.

Additionally, cultural images can inform opinions, which Hall terms 'cultural circuit' (Ellis-West 2011, 105). Occasionally, the overall effect is innocuous, but images can create false narratives which manipulate real world debate, and this is pertinent when considering reproduction for 'the formation of the foetus is [...] the history of its visualization' (Tremain 2006, 36). Imagery, and its cultural impact, is particularly significant in reproductive debates.

Whilst images of pregnancy are unexceptional in Hollywood films currently, they have not always been. Birth control's advent, and the consequent reproductive freedom, made pregnancy an issue for feminist authors in the 1960s and 1970s, but Hollywood avoided the issue, instead focussing on sexual liberation. Indeed, when reproduction was a central theme it was usually in horror films, for example in *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968), ensuring female protagonists were identified with monsters, and pregnancy with the abject, articulating latent anxieties around female reproductive capacities.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift, with pregnancy beginning to feature as a central theme in mainstream film; *She's Having a Baby* (Hughes 1988) and *Look Who's Talking*, (Heckerling 1989) for example. Responses to this shift were varied: Oliver states it was indicative of the increasing 'social acceptance of women's bodies' (2012, 22), whilst others argued these films largely reinforced a "'motherhood ideology'" (Kaplan in Ellis West 2011, 109). These films predominantly demonstrated the incompatibility of motherhood and work: they simultaneously advocated more family orientated roles for fathers, therefore, to Kaplan, reinforcing the white, middle-class, patriarchal nuclear family's importance (ibid).

Unsurprisingly, reproduction narratives have progressed with films like *Juno* (Reitman 2007) and *Knocked Up* (Apatow 2007) offering 'partial revisions of [...] traditional narratives' (Ellis West 2011, 109); nevertheless, stereotypes have endured. Images of pregnancy and birth remain clichéd and sanitised, and do not depict the realities of either. These images of pregnancy promote a twist on traditional family values, offering visions of women 'having it all', or, at least, 'realising that having babies is more important than anything else' (Oliver 2012, 25).

Seemingly, traditional family values are still being promoted in film in spite of progression. This traditionalism is emphasised when considering what these films fail to discuss: loss and infertility. Both remain subject to Foucault's triple edict of modern puritanism: "taboo, nonexistence, and silence" (Layne 1997, 291), which leads to 'the experience of loss [being] denied' (Layne 1997, 293).

This silence may be rationalised as the issues framing these subjects are utilised by anti-abortionists. Abortion rights are not universal or inalienable. Accordingly, it is logical to suggest acknowledging foetal personhood and promoting discussion of miscarriage and infertility as grief-inducing will aid anti-abortion campaigns, threatening abortion rights. Nevertheless, these considerations, whilst understandable, are flawed. By pursuing this perspective, feminists have potentially abandoned debate to anti-choice activists as 'to speak of pregnancy loss is to automatically make oneself suspect among feminists' (Layne 1997, 305). Whilst reference has been made to miscarriage, such considerations are applicable to infertility.

Feminist perspectives regarding infertility are contradictory. As Sandelowski states, feminist discussion must not condemn women for wanting children as women who have children relatively straightforwardly are not 'subject to the same feminist critique of those who try but fail' (ibid). Indeed, "by locating women's desire for children [...] in the pronatalist imperatives of patriarchal culture [feminist critics] permit women no authentic desire or choice" (Sandelowski in Layne 1997, 305). Whilst societal pressure on women to have children exists, understanding the potential source of a need does not dispel it, and as, arguably, all desires are socially produced, regulated and maintained, a desire for children does not differ.

All considered, one might assume the release of two blockbusters in recent years that contained discussion of infertility, power relations, and female autonomy would be met with acclaim. Set post-nuclear holocaust, *Mad Max: Fury Road* details Furiosa's (Charlize Theron) attempts to liberate despot Imortan Joe's (Hugh Keays-Byrne) wives from sexual and reproductive slavery. In this world, bodies are commodified, and the narrative answers the refrain 'who killed the world?' with a resolute 'men'. *Avengers: Age of Ultron*'s narrative concerns artificial intelligence's potential sentience as demonstrated by the murderous Ultron (James Spader). A subplot concerns Natasha's backstory, including the revelation that her spy training culminated in her sterilisation. Despite thematic similarities, which will be expanded upon later, the films received contrasting critical and popular reception. *Age of Ultron* prompted opinion pieces and a twitterstorm directed at writer and director Joss Whedon, voicing accusations of misogyny. To some, Whedon had foisted a 'frustrated desire for motherhood and self-loathing onto [Black Widow]' (Woerner & Trendacosta 2015) undermining her autonomy and heroism. Claims were made Natasha's characterisation contributed to biological essentialism in the film, which forwarded the notion women ultimately desired to settle down and have children (Hill 2014). Alternatively, *Fury Road* was declared a 'feminist conspiracy of mass-emasculating proportion' (Valenti, 2015) by high

profile men's rights activists, which led to feminist praise (Valenti, 2015, Smith, 2015) and industry awards. One may assume the different receptions came because the films forwarded contradictory narratives, and whilst this reading is valid, this article contends the films forward complimentary narratives and the differences in reception are attributable to concerns of authorship, industry, and a post-feminist media context. Consequently, this article will demonstrate the texts' thematic similarities and the differing contexts for their reception. This article will not denigrate either film's 'feminist' credentials, but will argue *Age of Ultron* forwards a nuanced articulation of *Fury Road*'s fist pumping, empowering, feminist narrative.

### ***Age of Ultron* and the Black Widow Backlash**

As aforementioned, criticism of Natasha's infertility was widespread: Stern stated the film reduced a 'badass assassin' to a 'baby obsessed flirt' (Stern 2015), whilst Bennett accused Whedon of detonating 'an old fashioned fertility bomb' (Bennett 2015). These claims are not meritless or unprecedented: motherhood has been used to reduce female heroes, to 'soften' them. In this configuration, 'the maternal recurs as a motivating factor' (Inness 1999, 69) and is the primary source of identity. This configuration is common in fantastic genres where 'the mother has been a constant presence' (Conrad 2011, 82). Whilst attempts have been made, via the use of single mothers and unconventional family setups, to challenge stereotypes, the perpetuation of this role confirms the "special tie that women have with children" that [...] Firestone [...] describes as being "no more than shared oppression" (Conrad 2011, 81). This linkage of women and motherhood implies, regardless of the fantastic's new possibilities, women will be defined by, and limited to, biology. Accordingly, the frustration expressed at the maternal aspect of Natasha's narrative arc is understandable.

Additionally, the depiction of this revelation is criticisable. In this scene, Natasha and Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) are discussing their fledging relationship's possible futures. The scene is fraught with emotional vulnerability; Natasha is in a bathrobe, Banner is half-dressed. The space's domesticity adds intimacy; the room is, in contrast to the Avengers' headquarters, cluttered with the detritus of family life: children's paintings cover the walls. It must be noted, and is infrequently recognised, Natasha's revelation of her infertility is prompted by a confession by Banner, creating an image of mutual intimacy rather than confessional shame. Typically, 'there has been a greater emphasis on infertility as a women's issue' (Johnson & Simon 2012, 265), so recognition of the issue's dual nature is commendable. Nevertheless, Natasha's use of 'monster' in her statement problematises positive readings. After detailing her enforced sterilisation, she reassures Banner he 'isn't the only monster on the team'. The statement's negative, reductive connotations are self-evident, and it implies women who do not express the expected interest in bearing children are deviant. The association of monstrosity with pregnancy still abounds in cinema (Oliver, 2012), creating a contradiction in which fertility is expected and denigrated.

In abstract, the linkage of infertility and monstrosity is inherently negative; however, this conclusion disregards the narrative's context and themes. 'Monster' had been used before

Natasha's statement as an adjective within the narrative: Tony, (Robert Downey Jr) Bruce and the entire Avengers team are referred to as 'monsters'. Furthermore, concepts of monstrosity relate to the narrative's central premise: evolution, and, as is common in Whedon's output, humanism and heroism. Consequently, Natasha's inability to bear children is indebted to discussions of evolution. Tony Stark creates Ultron, an artificial intelligence, to bring about peace; however, Ultron decides '[humans] don't need to be protected, they need to evolve', thus introducing concepts of worth, desirability, and what it means to be human. Tony is paternally, if not biologically, linked to Ultron, and this is evidenced through Ultron's inheritance of Tony's mannerisms and phrases. Moreover, Tony's sarcastic assertion Ultron will 'break your old man's heart', and Ultron's pathological hatred of Tony suggests intergenerational conflict. Positioning Ultron as Tony's quasi-offspring ensures *Age of Ultron* engages with the theme of living in a society in which definitions of humanity are being undermined as evolution takes on new, technologically mediated forms. Alone, Tony's creation of Ultron may be read as a cautionary tale concerning male intervention in the female sphere of reproduction; however, upon considering the narrative context this reading seems limited. Many of the Avengers are results of tampering with nature, and, with the exception of Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), have no identifiable family. Ultron was designed to render the Avengers obsolete. They resemble the 'necessary evil' figure in Westerns: essential to providing a fragile society security to develop, but necessarily expendable if civilisation is to emerge. This isolation imbues the Avengers with differing notions of monstrosity, and excludes them from the society they strive to save: they are, evolutionarily, a dead end; Natasha's 'monstrosity' is shared.

Yet, the Avengers' exclusion from society does not prevent them developing their community. Hawkeye's family match the American nuclear ideal; however, their physical isolation and that they are kept secret suggests this ideal may be unsustainable. Regardless of Hawkeye's family's status and security, Whedon often constructs alternate families, typically 'composed of social exiles' (Battis 2005, 13), of which the Avengers may be considered an example. They may be an evolutionary dead end, they may be 'monstrous', but they are a family.

To expand upon evolution, such discussions require consideration of desirability and worth, which *Ultron* provides. Natasha is not 'naturally' infertile; her sterilisation is ordered. It is presented in nightmarish flashbacks indebted to the horror genre. It is horrific and invasive: a condemnation of governmental and societal efforts to control female fertility. Whedon has previously explored issues of female bodily autonomy and control, and received backlash. *Dollhouse* dealt with control via sexual manipulation, and Whedon acknowledged the difficulty in these depictions: "when you're dealing with fantasies, particularly sexual ones [...] you're not going to be doing things that are perfectly [that is, politically] correct" (Telotte 2014, 92); delicacy is required. Nevertheless, critics often view such efforts 'as being exploitative, rather than the show being a story of exploitation' (Coker 2010, 226). If Whedon left his female characters as victims such criticism would be valid, but he creates 'a powerful vision of a woman's ability [...] to overcome [...] cultural programming' (Telotte 2014, 94). Whedon's work is invested in empowering heroic women (Moore 2012); yet his more

complex work implores an audience to remember that ‘it is just as important to discussing the troubling implications and reality of [...] disempowerment as it is [...] empowerment’ (Zhang 2012, 406), and it is within the latter context *Ultron* exists. Natasha’s story is of disempowerment, yet the aim is not to punitively punish in a gendered manner, rather it is to question the nature of societal governance of female bodies before offering a final, optimistic, transcendence. Natasha is distressed by her forced sterilisation, but it does not define her: she finishes the narrative a hero; Banner does not. She rejects Banner’s pleas to escape: the ‘job’s not finished’ she reminds Banner, and prompts him to ‘go be a hero’, transcending claims of biological essentialism.

This transcendence provides the final link between evolution and humanity. Overall, *Ultron* forwards a humanist view, advocating faith in humanity, granting individuals control of their personhood. This championing of humanity’s power runs throughout Whedon’s work: ‘at the core of Whedon’s worldview [...] is [...] faith [...] in humanity’ (West 2012, 266). Before the final showdown with Ultron, Captain America (Chris Evans) states this endeavour is about more than victory, it is about ‘whether [Ultron is] right’, whether they are monsters. Hawkeye supports this, informing Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olson) it ‘doesn’t matter what you did, what you were [...] you’re an Avenger’: *Ultron* acknowledges and addresses the abuses, manipulations and commodification of bodies, particularly female bodies, but allows its characters to transcend the subsequent trauma and become heroic. The narrative acknowledges its heroes’ potential ‘monstrosity’, but denies limited definitions: Natasha ends the narrative an Avenger, despite attempts to control her.

### ***Fury Road: A Feminist Masterpiece?***

If the reproductive politics of *Ultron* are interpretable, *Mad Max: Fury Road*’s appear unequivocal. *Fury Road*’s feminist credentials are self-evident; nevertheless, a summary of ideological points is necessary. *Fury Road* offers a horrifying image of a possible future in which women’s greatest threat is men. All female bodies are commodified: ‘desirable’ women are wives and breeders for warlord Imortan Joe; older, overweight women are pumped for breastmilk; the scarred War Boys are fodder. With the aid of Imperator Furiosa and the previously captured, somewhat reluctant, Max (Tom Hardy), Joe’s wives attempt escape, and daub their cell walls with slogans which state their autonomy: ‘We are not things’. The wives reject claims of ownership and are willing to die for freedom. *Fury Road* depicts the regime’s brutality and whilst it does not show sexual assault, it depicts a bloody caesarean carried out with a butcher’s knife. The foetus and mother perish, but the butchery is merely referred to as a ‘crying shame’. The film closes with Joe slain, his regime overthrown, and Furiosa and those left of Joe’s wives riding triumphantly to liberate others. It is relevant the revolution is led by women and children as they are most vulnerable to exploitation. The ending defies stereotype with Max disappearing whilst Furiosa is elevated, the implication being she will rule. Narratives often ‘end by denying [women] the male hero’s ultimate goal: political authority wielded to reform and empower’ (Crosby 2004, 154). *Fury Road* depicts women,

despite their enslavement, collectively overthrowing their (male) rulers and achieving liberation; it is unsurprising it was applauded as a feminist masterpiece.

Nevertheless, *Fury Road*'s feminist credentials are not indisputable. Firstly, it adheres to Hollywood's tendency to show unrealistic images of pregnancy: Angharad, the most heavily pregnant wife, is played by a Victoria's Secret model, Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. Despite being but a month from full term, the only indication of pregnancy is a tiny, svelte bump, indicating a reluctance to engage with pregnancy's physicality. This desire to depict only 'beautiful' pregnancies, and thus 'beautiful' women, is demonstrated throughout *Fury Road*. The scene in which women are pumped for breast milk evidences this: men drink this milk and whilst this is done to mark them grotesque, that point hinges on a sexist association of a natural process with the abject. Moreover, the camera lingers on the overweight women's excess flesh, confusing what is meant to be considered grotesque: the men drinking the milk, or the overweight women. Conflictingly, the wives' physical beauty is emphasised: midway through their escape bid, with their captors in pursuit, a gratuitous scene reminiscent of a sexually charged car wash is shown. The women are depicted wet, clad only in white, translucent underwear. The apparent message is women may demand bodily autonomy, but only if the bodies making the demand are 'acceptable'. Pregnancy may be joyful, but only if it is homogenised: the physical reality of reproduction remains uncomfortable; women may not be things, but they must be beautiful.

Furthermore, *Fury Road* cannot shake the biological essentialism linking femininity, motherhood, and nature. Such ideologies have historically dogged fantastical genres (Conrad 2011), reinforcing the association between femininity and motherhood as a source of identity, and encouraging an unachievable biological hierarchy. The symbolism and dramatics of an old, mortally wounded woman handing seeds to a younger woman confirms the film's assertion fertility is a female business. This demarcation of fertility as a 'female' business, however, is not inclusive of all variations of femininity: the seed passing scene may be read as a generational sharing of a specifically female knowledge, but could also be read as a regressive rejection of older women's involvement with fertility. If it is accepted *Fury Road* adheres to, and promotes, a culturally 'acceptable' – namely youthful and beautiful – image of fertility and pregnancy, this scene parallels societal fears which equate 'older' women with infertility, whilst simultaneously branding 'older' women monstrous should they desire, or have the physical capacity, to bear a child.

Correspondingly, the valorisation of women's special relationship with nature and motherhood could be more acceptable if *Fury Road* endeavoured as expressly to show pregnancy's physical realities as it did the female bodies' exploitation. It could also be more acceptable if the film depicted infertility and loss explicitly; the only references to either are Joe's frustration at the loss of a 'viable' son, his disfigured sons, and the mother/Earth/woman imagery which pervades the narrative. Infertility is an abstract idea in *Fury Road*: acknowledged yet lacking depth, secondary to championing of female autonomy. Perhaps the focus on autonomy is responsible for this: female autonomy is only encouraged whilst

functioning within accepted societal bounds which do not include consideration of infertility. Moreover, autonomy presumes the capacity to make choices: women are implored to control their reproductive capacities, enjoying both sexual liberation and an eventual family unit, but this formulation fails to account for women unable to make such choices. Choice narratives offer a false impression of absolute control therefore creating an inability to adequately respond to, or even acknowledge, situations in which this falsity is laid bare. The mantra 'we are not things' has revolutionary appeal, but should we be applauding, with regards to reproduction, mere assertions of personhood as the best women can hope for?

To conclude, *Age of Ultron* and *Fury Road* are flawed, but each forwards critiques of male, or governmental, control of female bodies, particularly in relation to reproduction and infertility. They are complimentary narratives: *Fury Road* is an empowering fantasy concerning the dismantlement of a totalitarian patriarchy, whilst *Age of Ultron* explores the quiet horror of enforced sterility. However, the films do differ in narrative presentation: *Fury Road*'s empowerment narrative is explicit, whereas *Age of Ultron* is more implicit: Natasha's backstory is a subplot. Despite these variations, similarities remain: both narratives allow their women to transcend the fate determined for them by their bodies and society; both women are heroic; and both end their narratives triumphant. So, the question remains: why the differing critical responses? This article contends there are three primary reasons: authorship and industry, 'tough' female characters, and the hangover of postfeminist leanings within contemporary feminist discourse.

### **Authors, Industry and Marvel's Women Problem**

Much has been made of *Ultron*'s thematic links to Whedon's other output, particularly those projects Whedon contributed to as a writer, producer, or director. Whilst one can overstate an author's capacity to shape a text, Whedon's role as writer and director, and the themes running throughout his work, suggest his ideologies impact texts he works on. Whedon's feminist credentials are documented: Whedon conceived *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a reaction to 'male violence against women in horror' (Earl 2004) mirroring artistic intent with activism 'in organisations such as Equality Now' (Wilcox & Cochran 2010, 9). A self-identifying feminist author may still produce a regressive female character; however, the label 'feminist' ensures greater scrutiny. As there is no consensus as to what defines a 'feminist' character, attempts to offer a complex vision of women and gendered issues will draw ire.

Furthermore, Whedon may be a feminist, but Marvel does not share his commitment; Marvel's reluctance to release a female led film indicates this. *Captain Marvel* (Marvel's first slated female led superhero film) has been delayed to allow for a Spiderman reboot (Eisenberg 2013) despite the nadir that was *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi 2007). Dissatisfaction with Marvel's sexism extended to the merchandising: *Ultron*'s release saw the hashtag #WheresNatasha appear after consumers noted her near absence from official merchandising. Whedon addressed this issue, and Hollywood's reluctance to back female led projects thusly:



“Toymakers will tell you they won’t sell enough, and movie people will point to the two terrible superheroine movies that were made and say, ‘You see? It can’t be done.’” (Yamato 2014)

If Whedon received scrutiny due to his feminist stance, and was limited by a studio system apparently reluctant to engage with gender representation, George Miller was comparatively unconstrained. One may expect a film concerned with male control and female autonomy would be scrutinised for having an all-male writing team, however *Fury Road* avoided this. This is partly attributable to Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, who has worked with victims of rape and sexual abuse, who acted as an on-set consultant. Ensler’s role may have been limited (she spent ‘a week’ (Dockterman, 2015) on set), but her presence adds feminist credibility which depresses criticism. One may cynically suggest Ensler’s presence was tokenistic, but it did help elevate the text beyond reproach. Issues of franchise and audience expectation are also relevant: both films were anticipated returns of popular franchises, but arguably *Fury Road* did not have the ‘baggage’ of incredibly high audience expectation, and the pressure of contributing to an expansive ‘super franchise’. Moreover, the *Mad Max* franchise is typically considered ‘masculinist’ escapist fantasy, leading to the presumption of a smaller female audience, as well as lowering expectations of female representation, thus creating favourable conditions for a ‘surprise’ feminist film. Seemingly, Whedon’s activism and feminist concerns added to the aforementioned ‘baggage’ making outright critical and fan praise potentially unachievable. Hence, if Whedon’s feminism clashed with Marvel’s sexism, creating ambiguity which invites criticism, Miller’s high-octane tale of emancipation paired with its legitimising feminist consultancy, suffered no such issues.

### **Hollywood’s ‘Tough Women’**

Natasha’s and Furiosa’s characterisations also require consideration. Both may be considered action heroines which, whilst a staple character of Hollywood cinema, remains problematic: some critics say action heroines represent a feminist ideal, whilst others warn “the mere borrowing, by a female character, of [...] masculine traits does not [...] lead to a representation of equality” (Cornea in Conrad 2011, 91). Indeed, they are either considered ‘pseudo males’ or, contradictorily, decried for expressing emotion, therefore undermining their transgressive potential, creating a double standard. These ‘masculinised’ figures must be feminised to be more acceptable yet this feminisation invites further criticism. As Tasker indicates, action heroes are granted the luxury of the interplay ‘of vulnerability and strength [as] characteristic’ (Hills 1999, 43), whilst action heroines must neither be too masculine nor too feminine, and consequently are rarely anything.

In light of this impossible standard, Natasha arguably faced greater backlash because of the depth and nature of her expressed vulnerability; not only was Natasha emotionally vulnerable, she also admitted to a gendered vulnerability. *Fury Road* allows Furiosa one emotional outpouring in which she walks off, drops to her knees and screams, but this

expression of despair carries not the same 'feminine' sensibilities as admitting a desire for a family. Nevertheless, accepting that 'feminising' a 'masculinised' character limits their transgressive potential implies an acceptance of a male/female dichotomy and the implicit hierarchy. Demanding female characters adhere to the emotionally stunted standard set by most male action heroes simultaneously valorises this standard, whilst establishing a standard female characters cannot attain. Victimhood is used to contain women, but both films allow their male heroes fallibility. Max is haunted by visions of those he failed to save, providing a trauma-based motivation for his actions, whilst Tony is depicted as acting from a misplaced drive to protect his team. In each instance, emotional fallout from trauma rather than logic is a prime motivator. This is a thematic constant for *Marvel: Iron Man 3's* (Black, 2013) narrative examines PTSD and anxiety, for which it was applauded (Lewis 2013). Yet, there remains a reluctance to see women as flawed, which is exacerbated by films with one main female character, ensuring she is expected to be representative of all women. Natasha's expression of a female vulnerability, and feminism's aforementioned reticence to acknowledge infertility's impact, renders her ripe for criticism, and indicates gendered binarisms' enduring appeal.

### **Feminism, Empowerment, and Individuation**

Finally, it would appear a disconnect between academic discussions of infertility and pregnancy and the lived reality of women remains. The deconstruction of the biological, nuclear family and the acceptance of alternative familial set-ups is desirable, but such utopic visions fail to account for the emotional reality of family; the presumed emotional connection associated with biological offspring. The biological essentialism implicit in marking motherhood as femininity's foundation is problematic, yet there remains an 'ideological connection between biological and social parenthood' (Gimenez 1991, 345); societal assumptions equate biological parenthood with parenthood. Whilst ever 'most women [...] adhere to a biologically based concept of motherhood' (ibid), it is unlikely societal views will alter. The idea that concepts of 'motherhood' are socially and politically motivated, created, and maintained may be accepted in academia, but this does not account for many women's experiences.

Natasha's self-loathing and belief her infertility discounts her from love and family may appear regressive, especially when considering her independent and resilient characterisation. This tendency to use motherhood to explain female characters frustrates: it equates motherhood with femininity so implicitly it ensures any deviation from, rejection of, or physical incapacity to become a mother is considered a personal failure, which renders an individual 'less' than a woman. Feminism has fought for woman's right not to be defined by her capacity or desire to procreate so whilst ever the stigma regarding childless women endures such characterisations will irritate. However, a binarism between women who raise children and those who do not halts progress and limits debate. It creates a silence around reproductive issues that more regressive, aggressive voices fill, leaving those who suffer reproduction-related trauma with little support. In creating and perpetuating this binarism,

these discussions ensure independent, capable women like Natasha are not women who should or do want children. ‘Mothers’ become a particular type of woman, and expressing a desire to have children can, if you are not considered this type of woman, become a transgressive act. Such descriptions sit at extremes of the debate, but a lack of discourse encourages extremes.

This issue is complicated by the residual hangover of post feminism. Post feminism advocates empowerment, but typically lacks political engagement: ‘drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’, these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed [...] as a kind of substitute for feminism’ (McRobbie 2009, 1). This focus on individuation encouraged feminism’s dismantling and a retreat to the traditionally ‘feminine’ ‘as though to say “thank goodness, girls can be girls again, that time of dourness and censoriousness is over”’ (McRobbie 2009, 8). Whilst feminism is currently attracting renewed interest, and potentially entering a ‘fourth wave’ (Cochrane 2014), individuation remains a part of millennial feminism. The ‘choices’, such as the rejection of roles as wife and mother, may appear more radical, and feminism may again appear political, but disconnects between ‘types’ of women endure. In this context, *Furiosa* enacts an empowering revenge fantasy conforming to Tasker and Negra’s description of post feminism as generating, and drawing strength from, ‘buzzwords and slogans to express visions of energetic, personal empowerment’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 3). *Ultron* forwards a nuanced representation of governmental interference in female bodies, and the consequent emotional fallout. Both films engage with empowerment and transcendence, the difference comes from their prioritisations of glorious revenge or generalised uncertainty.

There remains, however, a space for each narrative. Both demonise male control over female bodies; both demonstrate the lengths patriarchy will go to to deny women’s autonomy; both acknowledge the role of women’s reproductive capacity in terms of their exploitation and commodification; and both allow their women to emerge triumphant. The primary differences stem from their function: *Fury Road* is an epic fantasy, which allows women to indulge their feminist fantasies, which is important. *Ultron* is grounded in moral and ethical uncertainty which precludes it from fist pumping positivity. However, such narratives need not compete for the title of ‘Most Feminist’. Jointly, they allow women to consider what is possible, whilst reminding them of the reality that demands consideration of such possibilities.

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