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Beyond the Red Room: Cold War II, Genre and Feminism in Marvel Studios' *Black Widow*

Miriam Kent 

Introduction

This article examines the complexities of representing female agency and sisterhood in *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021), the first (and, currently, only) solo film featuring the eponymous spy-turned-superheroine who first appeared on screen in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010). *Black Widow* partially details the character's backstory as an assassin trained within the Red Room, a Russian spy organization that exploits young girls. The film mediates anxieties about women's agency, solidarity and national identity, offering a compelling case study of how genre and gender continue to converge. This article therefore focuses on the cultural and generic significance of *Black Widow* as a superhero-espionage hybrid film, which contributes to a multimedia franchise that has become increasingly concerned with feminist politics. I argue that, through its exploitation and hybridization of genre conventions, the film negotiates popular feminist discourse in its mediation of action heroine subjectivities and notions of sisterhood. In doing so, however, it perpetuates Hollywood's centralization of white femininity, while presenting negotiations of American identity versus a Russian 'Other,' symptomatic of Cold War II-era media. Ultimately, *Black Widow* exploits the themes and motifs of Cold War espionage thrillers to consolidate its feminist credentials. This is achieved through a complex 'hall-of-mirrors' effect, which refracts and reframes the film's incorporation of broader politics.

This discussion uses the twinned lenses of gender and genre to examine how this occurs. Building on the MCU's established strategy of "genre-blending" within a broader system encompassing superhero conventions (Taylor 2021), *Black Widow* is situated within a media landscape

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increasingly attuned to calls for greater representation of marginalized identities. However, this involvement of feminist ideals often demonstrates the shortcomings of broad understandings of ‘diversity’ as a response to structural inequalities. Superhero films continue to draw from action and action-adventure forms in their structuring around set pieces, visual and aural excess, an emphasis on heroic (predominantly American) individualism and, indeed, gender representation via the action body. However, they also draw from a wider spectrum of genres, such as in *Black Widow*’s use of espionage thriller conventions. James C. Taylor likewise argues that genre contributes to MCU texts as part of their intertextual framework; that genre-blending is enabled by and informs the “superhero architecture” of each MCU entry (Taylor 2021, 139). Against the backdrop of Cold War II anxieties and a shifting landscape pertaining to women’s representation in the media, then, the film provides a useful example to show how genre and gender remain entangled, despite attempts to address imbalances perpetuated in Hollywood cinema in the past.

This article ultimately brings into dialogue key theoretical concepts relating to popular (post)feminisms and the generic conventions of Cold War II cinema to draw out the specific ways in which *Black Widow* conveys notions of women’s empowerment. Cold War II encompasses a series of cultural discourses in which anxieties associated with the Cold War reemerged post-9/11. These narratives often exploit classic Cold War imagery—spies, secret organizations, mind control—to reframe those tensions within a contemporary context that renegotiates American national identity. As this article demonstrates, this often materializes in gendered ways. *Black Widow*, in its reliance on espionage genre conventions, can be situated within the parameters of Cold War II, while it maintains its attachment to superhero cinema. The film’s exploration of women’s identity is complicated by its reliance on Cold War II conventions, and it projects notions of empowered femininity onto heroines who are caught in between Russian and American state institutions. These tensions are further heightened by the fact that the film was released *after* the Natasha Romanoff’s death in *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019), a decision that, as scholars have argued, raises questions about the limitations of ‘feminist’ narratives within the MCU (Taylor and Glitsos 2023). As Shama Rangwala notes, *Black Widow*’s sacrifice in *Endgame*—carried out so that her partner Hawkeye (who has a family, while Natasha cannot have children) may live—is symptomatic of a broader tendency to convey women’s heroism in ways that ultimately reinforce the status quo in terms of race, sexuality and gender, rather than dismantle it (2022, 185). This tension between individual sacrifice and systemic change progresses, albeit narratively retrospectively, in

Black Widow—it is a prequel that carries the burden of *Endgame*'s foregone conclusions.

To unpack these complexities, this article first traces the development of *Black Widow* from her Cold War origins in Marvel comics to her more prominent role in the MCU, establishing how her representation has been shaped by shifting expectations surrounding female heroism. This is followed by a close analysis of how the *Black Widow* film's strategic blending of superhero and espionage genres—specifically its exploitation of Cold War II conventions—itself refracts popular feminist discourses of “sisterhood.”

From ‘Widow’ to ‘Widows’: Popular Feminisms and the Evolution of a Superheroine

The rise of superhero cinema in the 2000s, marked by a surge in adaptations of comic book characters, coincided with a period of complex and often contradictory shifts in how women were represented within Hollywood cinema. While this era witnessed calls for greater inclusion of women in action roles, it was accompanied by the emergence of distinctive modes of popular feminism characterized as postfeminist. In these postfeminist “sensibilities” (Gill 2007), political feminisms are “taken into account” only to be reconfigured within the patriarchal-symbolic, often with the effect of being discredited (while nonetheless relying on the feminist goal of gender equality and the so-called empowerment of women) (McRobbie 2009, 8). However, as I have argued elsewhere, this postfeminist context has resulted in characterizations of women often shaped by a return to gender traditionalism, compulsory heterosexuality, ironic sexism and the primacy of white, affluent femininity, not to mention an insistence on American exceptionalism and the forms of neoliberal empowerment that accompany this (Kent 2021). Women remained, if not marginalized, complex sites for the negotiation of gendered power in these films. It is in this context that women in superhero films have come to the fore, a shift that *Black Widow* attempts to address.

The transition to the 2020s did not signal the disappearance of these postfeminist tendencies; rather, they adapted to incorporate what Negra and Hamad (2020) refer to as “a mix of residual postfeminist formations and proliferating new feminisms” (2020, 83). This created an even more complex media landscape where demands for greater representation coexist with a resurgence of often violently misogynistic responses, a dynamic that Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) aptly describes as the “funhouse mirror” effect. Banet-Weiser's idea of the funhouse mirror is an especially powerful means of making sense of contradictory representations of feminist issues. She

argues that, within this framework, “politics and bodies are distorted and transfigured so that men—heterosexual, white men—are the ones who appear to be injured by widespread inequities and structural disparities” (2018, 45).

Like the funhouse mirror that informs cultural representations, *Black Widow* portrays both popular feminism and popular misogyny. However, I extend Banet-Weiser’s concept, arguing that *Black Widow*’s responses to feminist discourses are shaped by a critique of the popular misogyny the film itself represents—often through visually excessive, genre-based imagery and filmic conventions—and the shortcomings of what was considered women’s ‘empowerment’ within the earlier postfeminist MCU, in a manner that I characterize as a hall-of-mirrors effect. This metaphor encompasses the *recursive distortion* of popular feminism, postfeminism and patriarchal western ideologies at play within contemporary media. For instance, the film reframes and distorts feminist notions of sisterhood by offering a homogenous notion of women’s ‘sameness,’ which informs a sense of empowerment and solidarity that rejects a menacing ‘Other,’ as it navigates the relationship between America and Russia. The film achieves this in an often-reflexive way through its generically marked visuals, which involve characters in action sequences mirroring each other’s movements, frequently in a way that acknowledges the limitations of representation within a commercially driven system. Through this mirroring, *Black Widow* incorporates a popular feminist ideal of universal feminist sisterhood, which is negotiated along familial, ideological and national lines. These complexities demand a nuanced consideration of how gender, genre and ideology interact.

The conceptualization of popular feminism’s hall of mirrors maps onto Rangwala’s readings of MCU films as involving “liberal containment” (2022). These films, Rangwala argues, recognize, and present as unacceptable, systemic issues (such as racism, colonialism, patriarchal oppression, etc.), but this recognition becomes skewed through the solutions to these problems offered within these films. These solutions involve eliminating individual patriarchal villains, rather than addressing structural oppression. Even as the film appears to embrace a message of women’s empowerment, through the process of recursive distortion and reframing, it simultaneously reinforces the dynamics that make those systems of oppression resilient. The serial, cyclical nature of the MCU further enables these recursive qualities, as these narratives and their representational politics are assumed to continue into eternity. *Black Widow* thus represents the ongoing challenges of portraying female agency and solidarity within specific genre conventions (and a broader media environment) that both reflect and distort broader ideas regarding feminist goals,

while also reflexively critiquing the conventions of its own narrative universe.

This hall-of-mirrors dynamic is further complicated by the precarious negotiation between promoting progressive ideals and pursuing profit-driven commerce, as evidenced by Scarlett Johansson's lawsuit against Disney regarding the simultaneous release of *Black Widow* on Disney+. This lawsuit highlighted the complex mechanics through which Hollywood negotiates issues of female agency within blockbuster narratives and the tensions that arise when studios attempt to embrace social equity while also striving to achieve commercial success, potentially at the expense of individuals involved. The stakes for these films, which hold cultural and industrial significance as blockbuster superhero films that attempt to center on women (and, as in *Black Widow*'s case, could be directed by a woman), therefore remain high. Such films are under intense scrutiny and pressure to succeed both critically and commercially in a genre still typically dominated by male characters and narratives.

Further, the complexity of popular feminist imaginings of women's empowerment has become especially acute in a post-#MeToo media culture marked by the need for nuanced representation, the popularization of misogynistic discourse, and the limitations of 'diversity' as a solution to systemic inequalities. As Disney/Marvel has recognized audiences' increasing interaction with contemporary political feminisms, the company has shown a greater emphasis on 'diversity' and themes that can be interpreted in broad terms as incorporating feminist goals (Anjirbag 2019). Undoubtedly a result of, and response to, a post-#MeToo popular feminist media landscape, the film doubles up its engagement with feminist issues through the pairing of the central heroine with fellow action-woman Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh). *Black Widow*, however, complicates simplistic desires for increased representation of women, and attending to the narrative and filmic machinations that enable this increased representation reveals the film's underlying ambiguities negotiating both gender and national identity. For instance, while the film clearly critiques the ideal of the American nuclear family, it also reinforces the centrality of American national institutions through the thematic and narrative makeup of its protagonist. Overall, I highlight the complexities and inconsistencies present in the film through detailed textual and contextual analysis, drawing attention to ambiguities that continue to permeate the landscape of popular feminist media.

Black Widow is positioned within the well-established franchise of the MCU, which emulates Marvel comics' use of shared timelines and narratives across multiple (trans)media texts. The worlding of the universe(s) of Marvel comics and the MCU remains an "innately stretchable," global endeavor that exhibits extreme levels of plasticity, according to Adnan

Mahmutović (2021, 549). The porous qualities of the Marvel superhero storyworld facilitate the portrayal of different iterations of characters (e.g., across parallel universes or different timelines), but such storyworlds also adopt dominant characteristics of the extra-diegetic (or real) world, including references to historical events, politics and so on (Mahmutović 2021, 558). In doing so, they highlight that not only are the worlds portrayed by these media texts enabled by textual and conceptual plasticity, but so, too, is the world concept through which the viewer makes sense of the events presented. This flexibility explains why superheroes have endured—they remain infinitely adaptable to sociopolitical and technological contexts.

Black Widow, the character, debuted in Marvel comics in 1964 (Lee, Rico, and Heck 1964), amid the Cold War, and while feminist movement and Civil Rights movements were developing. This version of the character drew from noir conventions in her positioning as a femme fatale who was antithetical to the postwar domestic ideal (Sheppard 2015, 37). As Natalie Sheppard notes, her name is suggestive of the noir mystery film *Black Widow* (Nunnally Johnson, 1954) and the 1952 novel on which it is based, not to mention the venomous spider, whose name is itself gendered due to the widespread notion that the female eats her mate (2015, 37). Marvel comics of the time frequently positioned their heroes as being threatened by the USSR and Communism, especially arch-capitalist Tony Stark. It therefore followed that the Russian spy Black Widow acted as a seductive foil for Iron Man. Nonetheless, Black Widow eventually defaulted to the US and joined the Avengers (Englehart and Heck 1967).

Marvel later relaunched the character but was merely referred to as the “female imitation” of Spider-Man (Lee and Romita 1970), reflecting an enduring trend in superhero comics in which superheroic women are positioned as derivative copies of ‘original’ male heroes (e.g., Super-Girl, Batgirl, She-Hulk, etc.) (De Dauw 2021, 16). While her publication history has been comparatively thin in relation to other superheroines, Black Widow has been a mainstay of contemporary Marvel comics and, within the last decade, also appeared in numerous solo comic book series, coinciding with her appearance in the MCU. The intertwined qualities of genre and gender, established through Black Widow’s comic book heritage, thus carries over into her representation within the MCU.

This specific intertextual quality of the MCU Taylor (2021) refers to as “associative frameworks,” where the films recall elements of the comics (and prompt audiences to do so). While Taylor notes that sociopolitical issues may form part of these associative frameworks, I would add that these films, through the plasticity facilitated by Marvel’s storyworlds (Mahmutović 2021), are able to dispatch feminist discourses because these are, themselves, flexible and elusive, as are genre conventions. Hence, the

Black Widow of the comics not only sets a generic trajectory for her materialization in the film, shaped by genre hybridity, but also permeates an intertextual network that is inherently gendered. This porous relationship between fiction and reality, then, makes the MCU a particularly rich site for examining contemporary cultural discourses, including feminism.

Johansson's Black Widow made her first MCU appearance in *Iron Man 2*, a film firmly rooted in the conventions of 2000s postfeminist media culture. In typical femme fatale-inflected disguise, she is introduced as Natasha Romanoff, Tony Stark's (a.k.a. Iron Man's) notary. The character was well received by audiences and appeared in multiple MCU films. That said, Natasha's portrayal fell firmly within the postfeminist rhetoric characteristic of popular media of the 2000s. For instance, her introduction involved a 'comedic' impromptu boxing match with Stark's friend Happy Hogan, who assumes that Natasha is inept at boxing and is proven wrong in a scene coded as humorous and ironic (Kent 2021, 89).

Postfeminist irony extends throughout *Iron Man 2* and into 2012s *Marvel's The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012). In the latter film, Natasha is initially reintroduced in a scene in which she appears bound and beaten, wearing a little black dress, only to reveal that she is ironically deploying the construct of the damsel in distress persona to thwart her enemies (Kent 2021, 98). This is part of postfeminist modes of representation that encompass McRobbie's (2009, 59–83) notion of postfeminist masquerade, in which ironic performances of femininity are employed to present women as empowered (see Kent 2021 for a more detailed discussion of the postfeminist masquerade's crucial role in upholding gendered structures in Marvel films).

These recurring issues in Black Widow's early appearances illuminate the evident complexities of representing female agency within the MCU, a dynamic further highlighted by Marvel's initial resistance to granting the character her own solo film (Faraci 2014; Dry 2017). Again, the noticeable hostility of Marvel, and the Hollywood entertainment industry more widely, sits in contrast with an apparent embrace of 'diversity' and attention to women's interests by media corporations. These two phenomena coincide and collide within this highly paradoxical media environment. Nonetheless, the 2021 film's renegotiation of Black Widow's mode of heroism is ultimately reflexive, at times critiquing past postfeminist conventions.

These complexities, coupled with the industry's shifting attitudes toward women-led superhero narratives, culminated in the release of *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019), which, along with DC's *Wonder Woman* (Patti Jenkins, 2017), was framed as a turning point for women in superhero films in popular media commentary. Their circulation

as potentially ‘feminist superheroes’¹ drew attention to the ongoing gender-related issues in the genre, as well as some misogynistic audience backlash. *Captain Marvel*’s commercial success was nonetheless significant, and both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* navigate a particularly charged set of anxieties within contemporary feminist discourse, including the control of women’s bodies. Further, both films’ manifestations of such feminist issues occurs through its incorporation—and eventual expunging—of a patriarchal villain within a post-#MeToo cultural landscape. Building on such previous iterations of ‘feminist’ superhero narratives, then, *Black Widow* further explores female agency within a patriarchal context. While drawing on earlier feminist ideals of solidarity, *Black Widow* refracts these ideas through a Cold War II lens, resulting in its specific negotiation of women’s empowerment and sisterhood. This negotiation plays out most explicitly in the relationship between Natasha Romanoff and Yelena Belova as former Russian agents whose bond is shaped by a shared history of trauma and manipulation.

Genre, Gender and the Cold War II Superhero Film

The hall-of-mirrors dynamic is further complicated by the film’s reliance on Cold War II anxieties to articulate its ideas about gender and national identity. The bulk of the film’s action takes place after the events depicted in *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019), in 2016, after a brief opening in 1995. These 1990s scenes portray an idyllic American suburbia in which two young girls engage in playful gymnastics, their movements foreshadowing the physical demands that will later be imposed on them. Young Natasha Romanoff is portrayed as a blue-haired adolescent, retroactively preempting her characterization as an expert in masquerade that often hinges on her hair color—it also signifies a liberalized 1990s America. The idyllic imagery, however, is revealed to be a deceptive façade enforced by the Soviet state: a cover for espionage.

The family members are actually Russian spies carrying out covert operations. Father Alexei Shostakov (David Harbour) had been assigned this mission after taking part in the Russian super soldier program that made him the Red Guardian, the Soviet Union’s answer to Captain America. Melina Vostokoff (Rachel Weisz) is actually an experienced spy who has also been trained in the Red Room. This seemingly ‘normal’ American family is revealed to be a meticulous construct when Alexei and Melina alert the girls to make a quick getaway after having stolen intel from S.H.I.E.L.D.—the MCU’s counter-terrorism and intelligence agency. The film’s deliberate construction of the family as artificial perhaps suggests a critique of the traditional nuclear family as a natural, unquestioned unit, a

notably rare occurrence in conventional Hollywood cinema. It is the first instance of the film's exploration of notions of familial affiliation, sisterhood (both literal and symbolic) and national identity. The film's deliberate framing of the Shostakovs' constructed domestic bliss that masks their identities as spies demonstrates how *Black Widow* complicates conventional ideas about family and belonging, which recur throughout the film's negotiation of concepts of sisterhood discussed in the following section of this article. The film's overarching narrative envisions Natasha and Yelena's relationship as it shifts from familial sisters forced together by necessity under the dominant power of the Russian state to symbolic sisters bonded by shared trauma. This is facilitated by *Black Widow*'s generic makeup within both spy thriller and superhero conventions.

Black Widow essentially blends the recent past with lingering anxieties tied to the Cold War era. The choice of the 1990s setting in its opening sequence is also significant in light of how this period coincided with the popularization of postfeminist discourse in wider culture. The film here represents a nostalgic image of 1990s liberal America as emulated by Russian spies. This creates a sense of tension between nostalgia for an imagined past and the film's surfacing of more current ideological anxieties. The symbolic pastness of the 1990s flashback setting also opens the door to the "slippery truths of the Cold War era" (Fishman 2017, 45) within contemporary popular culture, particularly as those anxieties intersect with a nostalgia for a pre-digital world marked by distinct geopolitical boundaries. While the Iron Curtain had fallen by 1995 (and was a distant memory by 2016), the oblique mechanics of the film's genre allow for a blurring of such boundaries to present a generic—and gendered—amalgamation that remains culturally resonant.

Through its genre plasticity, then, *Black Widow* incorporates spy thriller components. These include double agents, political conspiracy and mind control. Indeed, the film was made during an era that includes the representational politics of Cold War II in Hollywood cinema (Prorokova-Konrad 2020). These portrayals are nonetheless often stylized through nostalgia and reminiscence that reimagines both Americans and Russians. Within these texts, the Cold War functions as a "metaphor [that] allows these films to tell us much about the two countries in the 2010s" (Prorokova-Konrad 2020, 7), making the issue of identity representation even more pertinent. Discourses of national identity, predominantly American, are inherent to the figure of the superhero. Like their filmic counterparts, superhero comics often mediated the Cold War from an American perspective featuring stories in which the US confronts Soviet villains and reaches to common binary oppositions: communism versus capitalism; liberal democracy versus fascism.

Cold War II media is complex in its nostalgia for a ‘simpler’ time when ideological differences between Russia and the US were perhaps presented as being more clear-cut. In spite of this, Cold War imagery of the Russian ‘Other’ has persisted within popular media of the 2010s, including in narratives rooted in Cold War conventions such as nuclear power, mad science, aliens, and espionage (Prorokova-Konrad 2020, 10-13). The 2010s were nonetheless a period of ambiguity. Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump’s populist nationalism bore strong parallels, and Trump’s admiration of Putin co-existed with reports of Russian interference in the 2016 elections, and sanctions on Russia following their 2014 invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine and the war in Donbas, which in 2022 escalated to Russia’s invasion of the country. While Cold War cinema of the 1940s and 1950s might have presented more jingoistic utterances of American national identity, what has been described as the loss of American national identity since Vietnam and the War on Terror (among other domestic and international missteps and disasters) has resulted in an ideologically challenging superhero media landscape. That said, Terence McSweeney suggests that the MCU’s strategy has largely focused on “reconsolidating essential myths about [the USA’s] supposed values and national character ... as a response to very particular crises of national identity which emerged in the wake of the trauma of 9/11” (McSweeney 2018, 27). The dynamics of this are undoubtedly gendered. Through the hall-of-mirrors effect, therefore, the film itself refracts and distorts assumptions about this era: the idyllic illusion of the opening sequence is eventually shattered but makes way for a narrative that is equally complex and contradictory.

Indeed, Cold War II films often articulate anxieties around US national identity through the figure of the female Russian agent/double-agent (Ward 2020). Recent films, such as *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017) and *Red Sparrow* (Francis Lawrence, 2018), position their central female spy characters as oppositional to the oppressive forces of Russian rule. They do this by using Cold War Hollywood tropes that depict the Russian state as omnipotent, corrupt, dehumanizing and restricting civil liberties. Here, people are considered resources, or even weapons, to be exploited for national security. The films position this in opposition to the CIA and by extension, the homogenized ‘West,’ which is portrayed as liberal, free and antithetical to Russia, despite widely reported critiques of US foreign policy and human rights violations committed in the name of US national security. The action heroines of these films typically defect to the US. The films therefore mobilize the figure of the action heroine to signpost the USA’s progressive gender politics to differentiate the country from an Otherized East, according to Dan Ward (2020, 113). These narratives posit an

irreconcilable difference between East and West (or Russian and American) in a way that is undeniably gendered. For instance, Kimburley Wing Yee Choia and Hong Zeng have argued that such films configure their female heroines as sexual subjects in line with postfeminist media conventions to assert “American nationalism via advocating the bodily rights of certain women” (Choi and Zeng 2023, 3). The broad concept of women’s empowerment thus becomes a rhetorical tool in the service of hegemonic ideologies. *Black Widow* similarly employs discourses of sisterhood in conflict with the oppressive, patriarchal regime that exploits young girls specifically. In this, Cold War binaries have been transplanted (post-post-9/11) onto the post-#MeToo cultural moment and Trump era. Like the comics on which the Black Widow character is based, such films set a generic precedent for the eponymous film.

Black Widow seemingly revels in its Cold War II narrative through familiar tropes of Russian antagonists, secret societies and espionage. Its opening montage sets the tone for the paradoxical nostalgic unease around a seemingly bygone era of geopolitical conflict. The montage strategically deploys nostalgic esthetics evoking the 1990s to introduce the Red Room, a site where young girls are systematically transformed into weapons of the Russian state. In the montage, the Red Room emerges as a signifier of patriarchal power and the exploitation of girls within the parameters of Cold War espionage. It is characterized by a spectacle of violence and control over the female body. The montage is set to an earnest reimagining of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” with female vocals. In this, a song associated with the youthful rebelliousness of the 1990s grunge era is refracted through a lens that reworks its connotations to signify the loss of girls’ innocence as they are exploited by the Red Room program. Set to the disturbing imagery reframing famous historical events and violence against the very girls whom postfeminist Western society had supposedly liberated, the montage is an onslaught of audio-visual information that establishes the film’s genre *and* engagement with feminist discourse.

The montage strategically blends nostalgic elements from the 1990s with violent imagery, initially depicting armed guards shepherding batches of girls between shipping containers at night, the lens flares of their flashlights lending further atmospheric and stylistically spectacular qualities to the sequence. These shots are filmed in slow motion, with shadows shifting to reveal the contorted faces of screaming girls. It is indicated that villain Dreykov (Ray Winstone) abducts these girls, selecting those he deems most suitable for Red Room training. He has the remaining girls executed. The montage juxtaposes shots of girls and paraphernalia associated with young girls with military brutality in imagery that evokes detention camp iconography. The girls are lined up; some are selected, and others are executed.

The transitions between these scenes echo the lens flares of the guards, resulting in a red-colored light leak that momentarily shifts into darkness between shots. Red light will recur as a motif throughout the film as another major contributor to its visual excess.²

In addition, the montage draws a connection between the girls and livestock, specifically pigs, which returns later in the film when Melina demonstrates that she can mind control the animals. This storyworld therefore presents girls as a resource to be exploited, as expressed later on by Dreykov when he describes girls as “the only natural resource the world has too much of.” The notion of excess central to Hollywood genres is here refracted through the physical bodies of the individuals the film conveys as exploited: there is an excess of girls in the world, according to Dreykov. Echoing conventional Cold War II conceptualizations of Russian security agencies, civilians are characterized as tools of the state, here. However, it is specifically girls’ bodies that are of utilitarian value, as confirmed by the patriarchal oppressor villain.

The Red Room girls are trained as Widows, deadly assassins, who carry out the orders of Dreykoff, who clandestinely rules the world. They are implied to have been involved in significant world events and conflicts through the evocative imagery deployed in the montage. Cold War Hollywood motifs of mind control are also evoked in the reprogramming of the girls. These subjects of the former Soviet state are rendered mindless drones used for killing. In the montage, moments of intense violence are placed in visual dialogue with mundane details: shots of a teddy bear discarded in a puddle or a child’s drawing on a wall confront those depicting a close-up of a marker pen marking the girls, dehumanizing them into interchangeable assets. By contrasting images of girls and girls’ paraphernalia with brutality, the film critiques a system that exploits girls’ vulnerability and divorces them of the individuality afforded to them by the postfeminist West. As the Red Room recruits only vulnerable young girls, the film appeals to a progressive sense of outrage at the exploitation of that demographic. The visual language of the Red Room itself, characterized by the spectacle of violence and control over girls’ bodies, presents a reframing of Cold War anxieties regarding mind control and national security, as they shift into anxieties about female vulnerability. As such, the film’s hall of mirrors refracts these anxieties and projects them onto a nefarious Other, even in its promotion of the bodily agency of women.

The film’s highly reflexive understandings of the wider representational politics it evokes are brought forward through the montage’s incorporation of what appears to be home videos of young Natasha and her family. The revelation, later, that these moments from Natasha and Yelena’s childhood, such as Christmas celebrations, were staged adds another layer

to the hall-of-mirrors effect as it pertains to the refraction and distortion of Cold War II anxieties. In this, the montage cuts between—and blurs—‘authentic’ moments of childhood innocence and the sinister machinations of the Red Room. The home video recordings bear the markings of a degraded videotape, such as date- and time-markers, an over-saturated and grainy image, and interlacing artifacts. However, these markings subsequently appear in shots of the girls being prepared for the Red Room and undergoing training, creating a paranoid sense of reality not being as it seems, as well as lending the montage a distinctive ‘vintage’ esthetic. As the montage progresses, the home videos incorporate increasingly jarring elements indicating their artificiality, such as microphones and studio lighting. The home video is thereby revealed to be ‘part of the act’ to aid the appearance of the family as ‘ordinary.’ This reveals the contrived nature of the girls’ supposed domestic bliss. It deliberately undermines conventional portrayals of the nuclear family—a unit promoted as an integral part of American security and stability in classic Cold War narratives.

The girls in the montage are also shown watching American cartoons as part of their training, also presented through dated television screens and low-resolution recordings, while slurping drinks from cups that seem to be from American fast-food outlets. This represents the Americanization of the Widows-in-training. The overtly constructed nature of this American national identity is to be renegotiated through the characterizations of the film’s central women, as Natasha ultimately maintains her Americanization more than Yelena (Yelena speaks with a Russian accent throughout the film, while Natasha has completely assimilated into American culture, including through the Anglicization of her surname). The montage goes further by interspersing clips from American TV news reports about “undercover spies,” and images of computer code, official-looking documents and powerful figures such as Bill Clinton shaking hands with Dreykov to suggest that such ‘real’ moments were always already part of a larger, more sinister power structure.

The unsettling juxtaposition of manufactured memories, artificial families and Cold War paranoia further reinforces the hall-of-mirrors effect, refracting the American anxieties of Cold War II and projecting them, through esthetics evoking the very mechanism of recording, onto a narrative critiquing the exploitation of women and girls. This negotiation will continue to play out throughout the film, particularly in its exploration of sisterhood, where Natasha and Yelena must confront how state manipulation and a shared history of trauma have shaped their relationship. This highlights how the film relies on gendered national boundaries that may be dissonant with the MCU’s politically progressive aspirations.

Black Widow's construction of nationhood and gender is further complicated through its contrasting portrayal of the two primary male characters, Alexei Shostakov and General Dreykov, the head of the Red Room. Alexei's characterization plays a crucial role in further establishing gendered national boundaries that are contested and manipulated throughout. Alexei is characterized as embodying an outmoded form of hegemonic masculinity that likewise marks the laughable obsolescence of the unquestioning nationalism of the Soviet Union in Cold War Hollywood media. Significantly heavier than he was in the 1990s and covered in relic-like tattoos signifying the former glory of the USSR, Alexei is reintroduced later in the film as having been imprisoned for criticizing the Russian state, again implying that Russian state agencies do not look after their own as a way of distancing these institutions from their US counterparts. Alexei is shown to be nihil-delusional concerning this former power as the Red Guardian, inventing stories explaining how he met Captain America. When pressed on details, he responds violently. At one point, after Yelena and Natasha free him from prison, a scene shows him squeezing back into his old costume with great difficulty, an act of force that symbolizes his compulsion to reclaim his former glory—or, even, be great again. A bloated, misogynistic buffoon, it is not a stretch to draw parallels between the character and Trump—although his characterization as Russian ties in with the ambiguities around US-Russia relations during the first Trump Era. The characterization of Alexei also rests on the absurdity of his attempts to reclaim this lost sense of power through outdated masculinity that defines his understanding of both nation and family. Despite his shortcomings, though, Alexei's character undergoes a redemption arc that explicitly incorporates his embrace of normative understandings of familial gender roles, as he reunites with his 'daughters' and embraces a sense of familial love, a benign patriarch. Indeed, a scene in which Alexei attempts to bond with Yelena suggests that the path to reconciliation lies in embracing American culture. He serenades her with a rendition of Don McLean's "American Pie"—a song that articulates a sense of loss of American identity and nostalgia, and used earlier in the film when the family exits their hometown—and she eventually joins in.

It is likewise significant that *Black Widow* separates the masculine personae of Alexei and Dreykoff. Alexei is clearly framed as a laughable source of ridicule who has problematic views but is ultimately harmless, while Dreykoff wields tangible power over world politics and actively exploits vulnerable women. It is Dreykoff whom those women ultimately eliminate. The masculinities represented by these figures are not necessarily inseparable, though, as perhaps exemplified best by both Trump and Putin—figures who demonstrably have outmoded ideas about gender roles and who are, by all accounts, ridiculous, but who also wield significant political

power. Rangwala notes that Marvel films of the Trump Era often present singular patriarchal villains in ways that reinforce the liberal fantasy that individual wrongdoers may simply be eliminated by heroic individuals (Rangwala 2022, 185). Dreykoff's elimination at the end of the film therefore provides an illusory purge of villainy, suggesting that by removing him, the system he created will cease to exist without consideration of the broader institutional oppressions that facilitate patriarchal figures.

Nonetheless, *Black Widow* comes close to criticizing the politics of the MCU and S.H.I.E.L.D. (as stand-ins for American geopolitics). These critiques are another instance of the film's hall of mirrors reflecting on and refracting the structures within which the film functions. Before their reconciliation, Yelena remarks on the differences between the two women: "we are both still a trained killer. Except I'm not the one that's on the cover of a magazine. I'm not the killer that little girls call their hero." Yelena's statement suggests that because Natasha defected to S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers (i.e. the US), she is hailed as heroic, marking a criticism of the kinds of representational politics at work in the wider portrayal of governmental security agencies and the MCU more widely. It is a self-reflexive critique of how superhero narratives actively construct heroic characters along the contours of patriarchal nationalism—narratives which, ultimately, include that of *Black Widow*. Even as the film attempts to critique some hegemonic ideologies, it continues to reproduce others.

Ultimately, the film projects criticisms of (women's) issues prevalent in US culture onto, essentially, Russian caricatures—it looks outward instead of in, highlighting its positioning within the conventions of Cold War II Hollywood. Furthermore, its notions of feminism tie into its differentiation of an imagined West (America) and East (Russia), as the Russians' villainy is articulated through an envisioned portrayal of how Russians treat 'their' women. This is not far from more broadly Orientalist discourses that surged in post-9/11 Hollywood cinema—the villains, here, remain broadly Other to Western values. These dynamics demonstrate how *Black Widow* critiques and perpetuates dominant ideologies concerning gender and power, and their intersections with nation and family. These ideologies are further worked out through the film's negotiation of sisterhood both within and outside a familial framework. Informed by this generic backdrop, *Black Widow*'s exploration of sisterhood as informed specifically by patriarchal oppression and shared trauma becomes highly complex.

Sisterhood and the Limits of Empowerment

Sisterhood is a theme that materializes within and through *Black Widow*'s Cold War II anxieties and the commodification of women's bodies as

weapons of the Russian state, a dynamic that is evident in a scene set in Morocco (now in 2016), in which Yelena ‘awakens’ from her Red Room brainwashing. Operating as a Black Widow assassin, Yelena carries out a mission to retrieve a package from a fellow Widow, Oksana, who seems to have defected. The package turns out to contain vials of red dust—an antidote to the Red Room’s mind control. The scene revels in the action, showcasing Yelena’s spectacular abilities through stunts and hand-to-hand combat, as she fights with Oksana. Both Widows deliver blows with efficiency and physical prowess emphasized in fast-paced editing and handheld full-body shots, until Yelena overpowers Oksana and violently stabs her in the stomach, twisting the knife for good measure. Oksana cries in pain and tumbles forward as the camera lingers on Yelena’s exhausted face post-combat, as she stands up, then pans over to Oksana’s limp body. An unexpected long-shot brings to the fore the prospect of unity between the characters as Yelena flips Oksana over to face her, and cuts to a close-up of Oksana’s hand, pointing a vial up at Yelena and engaging it. The vial sprays Yelena with red dust. Yelena is momentarily stunned. Here, there is a close-up on Yelena’s eyes, the image entirely tinted in red, echoing the red-light leaks from the opening montage—the subjugating connotations of the color now reframed to herald freedom. Her eyes glow red as residual dust sparkles on her cheeks. On regaining her bearings, Yelena remains confused, noticing a struggling Oksana and crouching beside her. Oksana is able to tell Yelena to “free the others” before she dies. Following this, Yelena painfully removes the tracker from her leg with the knife, symbolizing the act of cutting herself off from the Red Room. The act is characterized by its violence, both in terms of its self-administration and its connection to the killing of another woman. Its inherent contradiction, here, is an initial indication of the incongruities within the film’s conceptualization of sisterhood that emerges from brutality.

It is in the utterance of “free the others” that the Widows’ common subjectivity as victims of an oppressive state is brought forward, foreshadowing the film’s negotiation of sisterhood within the parameters of a system created to exploit them. In this sense, the Red Room, while it is embedded in Cold War II anxieties about ‘Eastern’ oppressors versus ‘Western’ liberators, is a catalyst for the film’s exploration of feminist solidarity. Ultimately, Yelena frees herself by aligning herself with Natasha, who has already undergone rehabilitation through her defection.

The film’s exploration of sisterhood is further marked by a complex, and at times contradictory, interplay of forces, symptomatic of the challenges of representing female solidarity within popular genres invested in spectacle and excess. The hall-of-mirrors effect adds further reflexivity, refraction and distortion to such ideological messaging. Sisterhood has been and

remains a key component of feminist political activism, but often overlaps with problematic notions of allegiance that bell hooks has critiqued as proposing a model of women's solidarity based on "common oppression," which ignores the socially situated realities of women's experiences (specifically in relation to racism) (Hooks 2000, 43–4). While envisioning a feminist utopia based on women's global solidarity, *Black Widow* harks back to postfeminist notions of sisterhood and unity between women. The film's hall-of-mirrors effect distorts complex understandings of intersectional political feminist sisterhood by portraying women's relationships as being rooted in an oversimplified sense of 'sameness,' which itself taps into—but also critiques—broader postfeminist understandings of "girlfriendship," as conceptualized by Alison Winch (2013). "Girlfriend culture" emerged as a mode of representation within postfeminist media in which young women's allegiances were highlighted, albeit based on a culture of "peer control" (2013, 2). These modes of girlfriendship, while predicated on overarching notions of women's solidarity, ultimately function in the service of furthering normative femininity (2013, 2). Here, peer control takes the form of women monitoring each other's appearance and behavior in ways that align with hegemonic understandings of womanhood, which are presented as being in the name of women's empowerment.

Such tension between women's solidarity and bodily monitoring is encapsulated in the scene where Yelena criticizes Natasha's habitual use of the "three-point action pose," which has become widely associated with superhero iconography.³ The scene takes place in a convenience store, framed by the camera through a doorway that acts as a further symbolic frame commenting on the notion of the public gaze Yelena critiques Natasha of seeking. Yelena asks Natasha why she does "that thing" when fighting, proceeding to demonstrate the pose. She bends over with her legs splayed, extending her arm to the ground, and whipping her head dramatically up and down, her hair in a ponytail sweeping the floor. These exaggerated movements are conveyed humorously, and the camera tilts up and down with her head, emphasizing the performance of the pose as she declares, "It's a fighting pose. You're a total poser." Natasha defensively explains that her "posing" was an attempt to "make up for... all the pain and suffering that we caused" as assassins. This exchange explicitly reframes the use of the pose in previous MCU films, including via Natasha in *Iron Man 2*, which registers on both a diegetic and extra-diegetic level. Natasha suggests it was her attempt at using her physical skills for moral good; meanwhile, the film recuperates the "posing" by incorporating a feminist critique of postfeminist modes of representing female heroism through objectification and spectacularization. However, Yelena, through her own exaggerated reenactment, could be seen as simultaneously mocking and

participating in the posing she critiques. Conspicuously, the cut to a longer shot shows the shopkeeper at the edge of the frame, calling into question the intimacy of the exchange and again gesturing toward the broader public gaze to which these characters are subjected.

This scene suggests the film's awareness of how female action heroes are often portrayed through a lens of visual spectacle, but also indicates a tension between sisterhood and peer control that is not unlike the girlfriendship articulated by Winch. The scene was undoubtedly a response to wider discussions about the cinematic portrayal of the character and the supposed impracticality of posing in such a way (as evidenced by wider news posts and discussions; for instance, Chichizola 2021; Labonte 2021; Tucker 2021; Wong 2021). However, with the film participating in a genre that relies on the spectacle of the superheroic body, practicality is perhaps not a useful way of considering these issues. Regardless of the motivation or effect of the scene in question, though, it highlights how superheroic women's bodies remain a site of gendered contention in relation to physicality on screen. Moreover, this reflexivity within the film again highlights the hall-of-mirrors effect, showing how *Black Widow* both acknowledges and takes part in the conventions it attempts to discredit. By showing Yelena explicitly critiquing the pose's artificiality—and, later in the film, emulating it in action and calling it “disgusting”—the film aligns itself with feminist criticisms of how women's bodies in previous postfeminist entries in the MCU were often physically signified through a series of stylized poses. In this way, the film refracts popular feminist critiques of broader issues in women's representation, but in doing so recalls the same postfeminist media conventions it purportedly critiques. The hall of mirrors, then, becomes a site where textual meanings continuously reframe existing power dynamics.

In her discussion, Winch draws from the work of Lauren Berlant (2008). It is worth returning to Berlant's ideas, here, to draw out the specific ways in which *Black Widow* mobilizes notions of sameness between women to establish its concept of (post)feminist sisterhood within what Berlant would define as “women's culture.” Women's culture functions to Berlant as an “intimate public,” a commodified set of codes and discourses that encourage the affective engagement of female consumers through a sense of communal belonging that is, nonetheless, highly personalized (2008, viii). Women's culture, Berlant argues, “is distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities” (2008, xi). A commonality between the two central women is established through messaging that resonates with the ‘emotional generality’ entailed in women's culture (2008, 5). Despite the film's positioning within a male-dominated generic space, there

are moments in which the film humorously gestures toward widely circulated 'women's issues' to nurture "perspectives derived broadly from women's experience" (2008, ix). In these moments, *Black Widow* further attempts to create a sense of sameness between Natasha and Yelena (and the Widows), that echoes popular feminism. For instance, an allusion to women's clothing lacking pockets is made during a scene centered on Yelena's vest, in which she draws attention to the utility of the garment and its extensive array of pockets. This is an example of how the film puts forward the rhetoric of emotional generality in relation to issues that frequently circulate in women's media and online spaces. Crucially, Yelena gives the vest to Natasha as a parting gift at the end of the film, imbuing it with further meaning as a symbol of their newfound unity.

This negotiation of sameness plays out through the materialization of the characters' sisterhood, which slips between the familial (as they are initially introduced within the family dynamic) and the symbolic (they are not biologically related). In any case, their sisterhood is constructed through a series of visual cues that often emphasize Natasha and Yelena's shared history of trauma within the Red Room and their 'mirrored' experiences as victims of a patriarchal system. This is especially apparent in a scene in which Natasha and Yelena first encounter each other. Having 'awoken' from the Red Room program and contacted Natasha, Yelena expects Natasha's arrival at a safe house in Budapest. Natasha cautiously enters the apartment, gun drawn, as Yelena's disembodied voice emanates from within. On her entering, the camera deliberately emphasizes their parallel movements as they confront each other, using shot-reverse shots, aerial shots to highlight symmetry, and tracking shots that follow their bodies in perfect synchronicity. Inside one room, Yelena points her gun back at Natasha in exactly the same pose. They exchange sarcastic quips before commencing a fight, their moves nearly identical as they smash each other into furniture and scramble to gain dominance over the other. They eventually reach a truce after struggling to the floor, both of their necks wrapped in the torn remnants of a curtain, in a kind of mirrored fetal position, which cuts to sequential shots of their similarly strained faces gasping for breath as they each pull the curtain tighter around the other's throat.

This visual mirroring creates a sense of tension in the scene, but also suggests how the Red Room has transformed them into almost identical weapons. This sameness, however, is picked up by the notion of sisterhood that frames the relationship between the two within popular feminist parameters. That this mirroring is portrayed through cinematic means evoking mirror images, and on multiple occasions by including mirrors with the reflections of the characters in individual shots, is itself reflective of the hall of mirrors that refracts the film's political resonance. It also

aligns with the mechanics of the espionage genre through the visual connotations of illusion and deception afforded by mirrors themselves. The mirroring is also important because it makes visible the trauma upon which the broad notion of sisterhood presented in the film is based—these women are physically capable (or empowered) because they have been exploited by an oppressive state. Through what Banet-Weiser refers to as “politics of visibility” (2018, 62) characteristic of popular feminist media, the marginalization of these women, who are normative in terms of build, race and sexuality, is made comprehensible.

This mirroring effect is not limited to these two characters: the film’s other villain, Taskmaster (revealed to be Dreykov’s daughter Antonia) is also represented as such. Taskmaster’s superpower is, fittingly, the ability to perfectly mimic anybody. She is rehabilitated at the film’s conclusion, herself a victim of her father’s abuse. The film therefore struggles to define sisterhood as both within and outside of blood-relations, considering it as at times limited to immediate family and at other times diffused among women, who are nonetheless coded as embodying sameness. In doing so, whether through shared combat skills, matching costumes, or a consistent visual esthetic, the film risks oversimplifying the complexities of feminist solidarity.

Still, these characters rediscover their affinity toward each other through the trauma of their abuse. Yelena and Natasha’s affinity is perhaps best illustrated in a scene after the two free Alexei from prison, which is again framed as comedic. Aboard their getaway helicopter, Alexei remarks at what he defines as Yelena’s aggression toward him, asking “Is it your time of the month?” This is language that has been widely used to discredit women who air their grievances more broadly, but its expression emanating from this specific character aligns it with a mode of masculinity coded as outmoded within post-#MeToo discourses (Boyle 2019, 67). With Natasha’s assistance, Yelena explains in great detail that Widows do not menstruate because they have undergone involuntary hysterectomies. In this moment, the state violence against Yelena and Natasha is explicitly articulated, verbally codifying their traumatic sisterhood. The scene reframes the problematic understanding of Natasha’s sterilization in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) and in doing so functions as a form of public intimacy, relying on a shared understanding of how women’s bodies and experiences are often dismissed within a patriarchal society. However, it also reasserts an understanding of superheroic women within established parameters of reproductive worth, which is itself patriarchal, another instance of the hall of mirrors at work.

Feminist sisterhood in the film is, then, rendered an ‘issue’ that is reframed and reworked through an implied sameness, which remains both

vague and specific, or in Berlant's terms, femininity that is "generic-but-unique" (2008, 5–6). Natasha and Yelena are presented as coming together because they have both endured abuse and exploitation sanctioned by a villainous patriarchal institution. The parallels between this sisterhood motif and #MeToo are therefore clear throughout, although it is perhaps in Natasha's final statement to Dreykoff—that she will never let him do this to anybody ever again—that this is cemented. Alexei and Melina had joined Yelena and Natasha as they infiltrated the Red Room facility, but the group separates and Natasha confronts Dreykov alone, while the others see to the destruction of the facility and the freeing of the remaining Widows. During this last confrontation in his office, Natasha momentarily overpowers Dreykov, having broken free from a pheromone-based form of mind control he has over all Widows. He cowers on the ground, the red light from his vast monitoring screen casting an ominous glow in the office. She draws her weapon but is hit from behind. The remaining Widows enter the office, having been activated by Dreykov, who exits, instructing them to "make her suffer." Natasha subsequently attempts to single-handedly combat a large group of Widows, which is once again visually articulated through precisely choreographed stunts. Natasha's white costume singles her out among the black uniforms of the seemingly undistinguished Widows who relentlessly attack her. The physicality of Natasha's struggle is emphasized by slow motion as the Widows seem to emerge from all directions. The tension is broken by the sudden beeping countdown of a bomb, followed by an aerial shot of the red dust vials exploding above the mass of Widows, again in slow motion. In setting off the dust bomb, Yelena assists Natasha in an act of heroism re-linking the women. Natasha falls to her knees, relieved. With an extreme close-up of one Widow's red-tinted eyes exposed to the dust, the scene draws a visual parallel between Yelena's earlier 'awakening' in Morocco, finalizing their solidarity.

Following a moment of disorientation, one of them asks in Russian, "What should we do now?" to which Natasha, speaking in English, replies, "Get as far away from here as possible. You get to make your own choices now." This exchange highlights the symbolic link between the character of Natasha and, ultimately, American individualism. However, this is complicated when the Widows return toward the end of the film's final battle to help Yelena and Natasha. The highlighting of the sameness of the women, while potentially effective in creating a sense of feminist solidarity, also reinforces the hall-of-mirrors effect by distorting the complexities of women's experiences under patriarchy. This dynamic is especially problematic when considering the film's lack of representation of women of color, and the projection of these issues onto normative white femininities.

Black Widow's sisterhood embraces a utopian feminist fantasy in its generic, narrative and esthetic excess. This is particularly apparent in the final moments of the film, in which Natasha extracts all the information about all the Widows from Dreykov's computer. The scene is established with a long shot of his enormous screen, with Natasha from behind. The screen, which resembles a hologram, displays a red-outlined map of the world on a black background. The sequence is intercut with medium shots of Natasha's profile illuminated by the familiar red light that has permeated the film. She activates a data transfer process, which scans through each Widow's record overlaid on top of the map on the screen. In doing so, the girls' faces appear to blur into one rapidly morphing face, symbolizing the Widows' unity but also oddly homogenizing the girls into one being. This sequence, with its excessive use of girls' images that blur into a singular mass, ultimately reinforces the hall-of-mirrors effect by reducing the girls into one spectacular visual. The global capacities of the Red Room are signaled by the positioning of the girls' photographs on the map, but in its visual makeup, the sequence prioritizes a problematic sense of universality. By reducing these women to a homogenous visual, the film arguably reinforces the same dehumanizing logic enacted by the Red Room program itself, albeit from a perspective that aligns with the (morally superior) West.

In this way, moments of apparent unity exist in conjunction with a narrative that ultimately prioritizes Natasha's individual choice to align herself with the Avengers, despite Yelena's previous critique. Toward the end of the film, it is implied that the Widows accompany Yelena, Alexei and Melina to attempt to free the other Widows who remain mind-controlled around the world. As Yelena and Natasha bid their farewells amidst the chaos of the previous battle, the suddenly warm afternoon light echoes the film's first sequence. Yelena whistles the signal that the girls shared in the film's opening. This is followed by a long shot of Natasha, alone, as she returns the whistle call. In a returning medium shot, Yelena smiles and nods once, and Natasha returns the smile in another reverse shot, isolated. While Natasha's final declaration against Dreykov clearly resonates with the collective anger and desire for justice at the center of #MeToo, the film's resolution ultimately prioritizes individual heroism and reintegration into a system aligned with the American state. It remains limited by the very structures that define 'empowerment' in a way that continues to marginalize those deemed outside of those normative structures. This ties into the wider framing of #MeToo, which, as Farnush Ghadery (2019) has argued, was often criticized for its emphasis on individual narratives, which potentially undermine an underlying need for collective action and systemic change, even in the movement's global reach.

While the film implies that Natasha has used her position of power to make amends for her past, this operates within and is defined in relation to another set of powerful institutions (the MCU, S.H.I.E.L.D., the US government). The film's conclusion leaves little room to consider how those institutions implicate those who are deemed 'Other' to the norms they encompass. The scene in which Natasha departs to return to the Avengers, two weeks after the Red Room's destruction, further highlights the limitations of *Black Widow's* sisterhood. While she tells her friend Rick that she now has "two families," she chooses to rejoin the Avengers, a decision reinforced by the crescendo of the Avengers theme music as she flies her plane out of the shot. The film, here, is cyclical, as the camera lingers on the trees in the foreground, tilting down to capture glow worms young Natasha had admired in an early scene.

These cyclical qualities map onto the recursive nature of the hall-of-mirrors effect that shapes the film's engagement with feminist discourses. There is an implication that Yelena will continue the cycle of violence that started with the Red Room in the film's post-credits sequence, in which she sets out to avenge Natasha's death by targeting Clint Barton/Hawkeye, whom she holds as responsible. Yelena is set to return to the MCU as "White Widow" (Tyler, 2024), a nomenclature that maintains a symbolic connection to both Natasha and the Red Room in another seeming paradox. This decision to replace one Widow with another suggests that female characters within the MCU are interchangeable in servicing the franchise's need for recognizable figures. Winch argues that postfeminist girlfriendships, while appearing to celebrate female bonds, are often predicated on a paradox: women are encouraged to be both unique and conform to normative femininity. This results in constructions of subjectivity that are "normatively distinctive" (Winch 2013, 3). Yelena's shift into a revised Widow illustrates this paradox. Here, Yelena is both unique (she possesses her own distinct personality) and the same (she is another product of the Red Room; another female superhero who takes up that mantle). Given the seemingly endless potential of the MCU, it is assumed that the revision of characters in this way will perpetually continue—another example of the recursive qualities of the ways in which popular media texts take up wider political issues

Conclusions

This article has interrogated *Black Widow's* complex negotiation of genre, gender and sisterhood within the commercially-driven landscape of the MCU. I have argued that while the film promotes progressive sentiments of women's solidarity and empowerment, its narrative strategies and visual

language are articulated through a hall-of-mirrors effect that reflexively refracts and distorts both normative ideologies and critiques thereof. Here, I take up Banet-Weiser's specific notion of distorted mirroring to extend the funhouse mirror's qualities to encompass the *recursive* distortion that takes place in these media texts. *Black Widow* indeed demonstrates how ideological complexity occurs in contemporary media. However, by characterizing these mechanics as a hall of mirrors, I emphasize how such media continuously circulate multiple layers of reflection, refraction and potential distortion of conventions and ideologies to which they themselves contribute—and which they often critique.

The concentric issues of gender and national identity, as well as sisterhood, converge through the film's genre plasticity through intricate layers of refraction and distortion of wider issues. The film's attempts to critique patriarchal power and the exploitation of women's bodies co-exist with the limiting nature of the Cold War II anxieties it perpetuates. Thereby, the film's political resonance is both normative and subversive. This dynamic is further complicated by the film's uneasy relationship to sisterhood—a concept that, while seemingly central to its 'feminist' message, often materializes through a homogenized iteration of women's solidarity.

This reliance on the hall-of-mirrors effect ultimately results in an often contradictory vision of sisterhood, in which a shared state-inflicted trauma functions as the primary foundation for Natasha and Yelena's solidarity. This is itself reflexive in the film's repeated use of visual mirroring, where Natasha and Yelena are presented as almost identical in their fighting styles and physical abilities. In this sense, the characters are comprehensible through a sense of sameness that reaches back to postfeminist modes of women's representation, which the film at times also critiques. Furthermore, *Black Widow*'s concept of sisterhood is framed (and reframed) within a Cold War II narrative that privileges Western ideals, positioning Natasha's defection to the US—and her ultimate return to the Avengers—as central. Couched in the discourse of individual choice over collective action, then, this contributes to a neoliberal perspective associated with postfeminism, and prioritizes the character's assimilation into dominant power structures.

Ultimately, *Black Widow* continues the trajectory of the MCU to produce films that engage with feminist discourses in significant ways, while highlighting the ongoing challenges of representing those ideals within a commercially-driven system. It is symptomatic of the deeper ideological structures that continue to shape representations of women and their relationships to one another. As Rangwala (2022) argues, films such as *Black Widow*, while offering an iteration of female empowerment, continue to rely on the promotion of individualistic triumphs that ultimately reinforce the status quo. The film thus does not confront the more systemic issues that

perpetuate gender inequality and obscure the need for more radical forms of collective action. Characteristic of the broader scheme of Marvel films, there is a centering of whiteness in *Black Widow*. Widows of color are occasionally portrayed (e.g., in photographs) but not in a substantial capacity. A problematic figure such as Dreykoff might consider the overwhelmingly white Widows to be more worthy, but this reading is speculative and returns the discussion back to notions of believability and genre. The film ultimately follows in the MCU's white-centricity, and the traumatization of white women is evidently at the center of the narrative in a conventional manner.

The hall-of-mirrors effect signifies the ongoing challenges of representing and responding to wider feminist politics through profitable franchises such as the MCU. Such franchises continue to hinge on displays of spectacle, individualistic heroism and a broad simplification of complex issues related to power and identity. While texts such as *Black Widow* do not exist in a cultural vacuum and clearly refer to and reframe their own problematics and contradictions, the mediations they offer continuously blur the line between critique and complicity.

Black Widow is clearly a product of a distinct period of both American history and Hollywood filmmaking. Despite wider discussions of superhero fatigue, there remains much at stake with these kinds of blockbusters. Looking forward, it is likely that themes of agency and feminist action narratives will develop following more recent developments in American politics that affect women and marginalized communities, such as the overturning *Roe v Wade*, which now allows individual states to determine specific abortion rights, the truly post-#MeToo retrial of Weinstein following his overturned rape conviction, and, indeed, the re-election of Trump. Given the ongoing coexistence of feminist goals with often problematic, even conservative, gender representation, Marvel will continue to refract popular discussions of feminist issues in compelling ways.

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Notes

1. Popular readings of these films were by no means singular in their characterizations of the central heroines being, concurrently, feminist (Williams 2017; Rosenberg 2017;

Framke 2017; Palmer 2019; Watercutter 2019; Yamato 2019) or not feminist enough (Cauterucci 2017; Harold 2017; Solis 2017; Joho 2019; Wilhelm 2019). However, the fact that they were frequently discussed within the parameters of an (imagined) feminism by popular commentators attests to the notion that gender and feminist issues remained core sites of meaning-making within and around their media circulation.

2. It is worth noting that *Black Widow* embraces the visual and narrative excess associated with superhero films. However, this analysis will not focus on the concept of excess in and of itself, but rather on how the film's negotiation of specific genre conventions intersects with broader political and gendered discourses to create a hall-of-mirrors effect.
3. Marvel films have deployed the pose to mark women as heroic in prior films in ways that align with postfeminist media, such as in *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013) and *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016), and, indeed, in *Black Widow*'s portrayal in *Iron Man 2*.

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