

Captain America's, Ironman's, and Thor's Anxiety and Defense Mechanism in *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to discuss the anxiety and defense mechanism of three main characters of the superhero movies, namely, Marvel's *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. The three main characters discussed have the capabilities to save the world. Yet, despite their capabilities as superheroes, they have their own weaknesses, just like human beings. In my analysis, I investigate the weaknesses of the main characters, namely, Captain America, Ironman, and Thor. Using Cramer's concept of anxiety and defense mechanism (1991, 2009, 2016), I find that their weaknesses triggers anxiety. In return, their anxiety creates fear and guilt. These fear and guilt lead Captain America, Ironman, and Thor to developing their defense mechanism. However, each main character use different kinds of defense mechanism. Captain America uses denial. Ironman uses denial and rationalization. Thor uses repression. To sum up, I conclude that although the main characters in *The Avengers* and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* are superheroes, they have their own weaknesses and they are still human.

Keywords: Defense mechanism, anxiety, movie, action

INTRODUCTION

In these days, there are various genres in the film production, one of the genre is action film. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies, action genre is a genre that uses the spectacular movement of bodies, vehicles and weapons, and state-of-the-art special effect. These highly dynamic elements, together with the actors' physical performances a central attraction, are usually held together by a fast-paced, pared down, goal-orientated storyline.

The action genre did not become popular in Hollywood until 1980s and 1990s, popularized by Bruce Willis and Sylvester Stallone. In each development the action genre produces some subgenres, such as action thriller and even superhero. According to Coogan, superhero genre is a genre that is using superhero as a main character (Coogan, 2006, p. 24). It makes their superpower obtained either by science or mystical power. In this thesis I am interested in analyzing a superhero movie.

Bauer, Georgeson, Mcnamara, Wakefield, King, and Olympia write that, "superhero films have become incredibly popular with both children and adults. Since 2000, there have been more than 70 films with superheroes depicted, grossing more than 15 billion dollars worldwide" (2016, p 1). This shows that superhero movie are able to attract the interest of the audience. The audience's interest may come from the use of "computer animation virtual world making and 3D modelling" in the sub genre, (Dudenhoeffer, 2017, p. 2). The use technology and visual effects fascinates audience, and thus adds its popularity. Besides that, the audience's interest also comes from how the protagonists are depicted. They have superpowers, which, according to Coogan, "are the most identifiable elements of superhero genre." (2006, p. 31). By looking at

their strengths to fight the villain, it is almost impossible to find their weakness. This happens because, in Žižek's opinion, "superheroes are an answer to people's distress of a human condition." (2016, p. 859). The popularity, the use of technology, and the depiction of the protagonist are the reason why I choose superhero movie. Among many superhero movies, *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* movies attract the attention.

The Avengers and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* are two of many movies that have been adapted from comic books. The creator of the superheroes, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created a group of superheroes who tried to defend the earth and one of them comes with *The Avengers*. In the movie, it focused on the story of seven superheroes who were once working alone, put together in a group and fight a threat from outside the earth.

As the same as mere human, these superheroes have their own fear of what the world will become. These superheroes are trying their best to protect the earth while having their own personal objective which makes them clash to each other.

As strong as they are going, these superheroes believe that there are many bigger threats than this, and the threat will surpasses their strength to protect the earth. This will lead into their struggle to protect the earth, causing their anxiety arise. In this struggle of being a superhero, it can be analyzed through their psychological state.

The two of *The Avengers* movies, apart from the popularity can be analyzed deeper than it looks in the movie. This thesis can be used to research the comic adaptation movie since there is a little explanation about Captain America, Ironman, and Thor. These are the three main superheroes that will be analyzed in *The Avengers* movies, it can be found that Captain America, Ironman, and Thor has anxiety and defense mechanism. These anxiety and defense mechanism can be related and reminded us that even superheroes are like ordinary human beings, filled with anxiety and put their defense mechanism up to prevent them from being weak emotionally.

In everyday's life people are facing problems that triggers anxiety and fear, they become part of life. This is why whether they like it or not the problems cannot be separated from lives. Then, people will try to overcome their problem and cope with the anxieties and fears that the problem triggers. Their effort to overcome the problems, anxieties and fears may trigger their subconscious mind to put up a system of defense. This system of defense in Freud's writings called defense mechanism.

In his paper, "Seven Pillar of Defense Mechanism Theory", Cramer (2009) mentions that defense mechanism is a group of mental operations in unconscious processes. Even though they are different in many ways but their purpose are the same, to protect people from experiencing anxiety and fear, and to produce self-esteem. In Cramer's paper, there are few motives to develop the defense mechanism.

Quoting Fenichel, Cramer writes that there are few motives for developing the mechanism. Two of them are anxiety and guilt (2006, p 96). Anxiety arise because the person is filled with the excitement, this makes the ego becomes panic. To anticipate the uncontrollable excitement, the ego developed an anxiety signal that turns into defensive position. If the ego fails to control the anxiety it becomes overwhelming and panic is ensue. The other motive for defense, the guilt feeling is coordinated towards an object-relations approach to understanding the personality development. Fenichel said that in the early development, human needs support from the important figure or supplies their narcissism, if the person loses the narcissistic supplies, it created a signal for defensive action.

Another thing that become the motives of triggering the defense mechanisms is the fear. Wayne A. Davis has a more complex explanation on what fear is. In his journal, "The Varieties of Fear" (1987, p. 287). It stated that fear is a psychological state of being afraid of something, afraid to do something, afraid that something will happen, or simply afraid. Inside this journal, Davis also quoting Gordon (1980) He made a distinction between fearing that something in the case or the experience state of fear, which one has no particular object to fear and the other has. As both are different according to Joseph D. In Fear, Phobia, and Panic (1991, p. 397). Fear is an inborn response which perceive as a danger and signal anxiety as the capacity of ego to become the anticipatory to anticipate danger. In the "The Psychology of the Attacked: The Universality of Fear" it was mentioned that fear has few factor to create fears, it is said that every people has a possibilities of being a soldier, but most of them are not. There are few factor like risk, the enemy and his weapons, personal factor, helplessness, and casualties. I am using fear because it is a basic emotion for human to sense the danger and I think that even superheroes who has a magnificent strengths than a human should have too because it is a basic emotion of individual creature.

Guilt is one of the few things that turn the defense mechanisms on, according to Fenichel, guilt feelings is an anxiety for the loss of the (superego's) provision of well-being, protection, and security. Even though both are connected as the motives of the one which triggers the defense mechanism it is one motives of defense that is rarely used as the fear is bigger than the guilt.

These are the few factors that I will use in this thesis that triggers the defense mechanism. The defense mechanism itself has many kinds of defense mechanism, but there are several defense mechanisms that I caught within Captain America, Ironman, and Thor in the movie which can be related both what their fear is and the defense mechanism that they have. These are three defense mechanisms that will be used in analyzing Captain America, Ironman, and Thor.

Denial is used to describe a situation which the person cannot accept the reality or admit the truth. When people are trying to cope with their sadness or depression, they usually try to avoid it and always say that they are okay, even though they are not.

Repression is an unconscious mechanism that the ego created to keep the disturbing ideas or fantasies out from the conscious awareness. The idea is when person who has phobia but he forget when did he get one.

Rationalization, the defense mechanism that involves in explaining an event less threatening. The people who experienced it usually explaining themselves in logical way to avoid the truth by making excuses. Reaction formation is the next mechanism, which reacting to other opposite feelings or behavior. An example for this mechanism is that you are being friendly to the person that you hate in order to hide your real feelings.

These are three kinds of defense mechanism that I will use, each of defense mechanisms can be represented in these three superheroes, and some superheroes have two defense mechanisms. These three superheroes are taking part mostly in the movie and they have employed several characteristics of the defense mechanism.

ANALYSIS

In *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, I see that the superheroes show their superpower whether it is a mystical like Thor or science method like Ironman. However, when I analyze them more carefully, I can see that they are not so powerful as many people think. They have anxieties that trigger their mental weakness. In their effort to overcome their mental weakness they develop defense mechanism. In this thesis, I analyze three of The Avengers

members, namely, Captain America, Ironman, and Thor. In the analysis I focus on their anxiety and defense mechanism.

According to *Oxford Dictionary*, anxiety refers to a feeling of worry, nervousness, or uneasy about something with an uncertain outcome. Anxieties are often caused by a number of factors, among others fear and guilt. In analyzing the three main characters I focus on these factors, namely their fear and guilt. The characters' fears and guilts comes from their mental condition of thinking that they have responsibility and power. The word responsibility has three meaning, and the one I am using in this thesis is the state or fact of having a duty to deal with something or of having control over someone. And power means the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way.

In the movie, I found out that these three superheroes, even though they are powerful, they are mentally fragile. They had past trauma that makes them afraid of being unable to fulfill their responsibilities and losing power for fighting a bigger villain. The fear of losing their power and the guilt of being unable to fulfill their responsibilities trigger their subconsciousness to put up their defense mechanism. Defense mechanism is a group of mental operations in unconscious processes. Even though they are different in many ways, their purpose are the same, to protect people from experiencing anxiety, and to produce self-esteem (Cramer, 2009, p 1). There are several types of defense mechanisms. However, in this analysis, I choose the types of defense mechanism found in the movies. There are some defense mechanism that is already related to the analysis of fear because it is shown in the movie and the dialogue how they react to something that they fear. In some scenes, I can see that these three heroes are trying their best not showing fear by pretending to be strong and calm.

Captain America's anxiety and defense mechanism

The first superhero that will be Captain America, in these movies, Captain America is showing that he has the responsibility to protect people and to lead The Avengers. Being the Captain America brings a burden to him as he has to protect his people and teammates in the battlefield. The failure in the past while fighting Nazi and getting his teammates killed and being frozen for seventy years are early proofs that he was unable to fulfill his responsibilities and protect his people.

In the first analysis, Captain America was thrown into a vision by his enemy, it shows that he was going back to 1940s when America won the war against Nazi. It showed flashes and people danced around him. In his confusion, Peggy, his girlfriend from the past telling him that the war is over. This situation made Captain America confused, because he was in the 2010s and he went back to 1940s. When he was in the middle of confusion, suddenly these people including Peggy vanished, left him alone in confusion. It shows that he was alone and the vision showed his deepest fear, which is losing his teammate and his girlfriend, Peggy. It made him fear of the responsibility of protecting the people, because it shows that he become Steve Rogers, the citizen of America, not the Captain America anymore.

Another proof that shows the Captain America's fear is when Captain America, Ironman, and Thor is ambushing Ultron in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Captain America said that the Maximoffs twins can be saved, but they are refusing Captain America. Then, Ultron said that Captain America is pretending that he could not live without war. This dialogue that Ultron is showing is a proof that Captain America is afraid that he is unable to fulfill his responsibility, to fulfill it, he needs to fight in a war, so that he can have his purpose back.

Captain America also afraid that he cannot lead The Avengers. As mentioned above, his teammates were dead, leads him into the anxiety of not being unable to fulfill his responsibility.

It connected to the next fear which is he cannot lead The Avengers. The scene shows that Nick Fury is throwing a pack of card, stained with blood. It was Agent Coulson's blood, Nick said that he did not get to ask Captain America to sign it, as Agent Coulson is Captain America's biggest fan. This shows his fear as the leader of The Avengers when Nick Fury pointed him to become one. Back then he was afraid because of his teammates from the war died and now it is one of the people around him who is dying. These fear leads him to the defense mechanism that he has.

Denial as a defense mechanism, according to Litchenberg and Slap (1972), functions through the disavowal of whole percepts and the substitution of a wish-fulfilling fantasy. It means that the person, who put their defense mechanism up, in this case denial, cannot accept the truth and suppressing their pain or unsettling emotion by employing daydreaming or imagination.

The scene is showing that Captain America and Ironman is arguing after Agent Coulson's death. Captain America asks Ironman whether it is his first time losing a soldier, Ironman is getting mad by telling Captain America that they are not soldiers. Captain is denying that he was not a soldier too, he realizes that it is a different war, so he turns his point of view from the world war two that he fought before to the modern way of superheroes. It shows that Captain America cannot live a single day without being in a war and he realizes it.

The second scene that supports this analysis is the dialogue from *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, in here Ultron tells Captain America that he was pretending to live without the war. This was shown in Captain America's fear that he was afraid of losing his responsibility as Captain America. Because he realizes that without the war he is just Steve Rogers, an ordinary citizen. From the dialogue we can analyze that along this time, Steve has been putting his denial that he was imagining peace, without realizing that he needs war to show up who he is. Moving to the second superheroes which is Ironman who has several similarities in anxieties.

Ironman's anxiety and defense mechanism

The second superhero who has the same anxiety as Captain America is Ironman or Tony Stark. In the scene where Scarlet Witch enters his mind, he saw a vision where aliens attacked again and saw a pile of corpses, his teammate's corpses. In this vision Wanda wants to trigger his anxiety by showing aliens' invasion and his dying teammates. This situation makes Ironman anxious because he suffers from the fear that Captain America has. Ironman's anxiety comes from his doubt whether he is able to fulfill his responsibilities or not. Judging from the situation, he feels that it is very difficult for him to do, that is, saving the earth from the aliens' attack. This anxious feeling triggers his fear. He fears that he is unable to fulfill his responsibilities because he knows a bigger threat is approaching and he cannot save everyone on the earth from it. Among those fears, Tony also has guilt that succumbs him toward this scenes, it was shown by his face was full of fear and regrets because he cannot save them all.

In this scene, Captain America said that Ironman could save them and why he did not do more. Captain America's statement shows that other people think that Ironman can save the earth, but they cannot accept the fact that Ironman do nothing to save them. It seems that they do not understand that Ironman suffer from a trauma in the past when he was about to die, that is, the time when he was unable to survive. That is why he is anxious whether he becomes powerless. His anxiety trigger the fear in his mind that he cannot fight against the invasion and he could not help another people if he is dying again. It reminds him that he is unable to fulfill his responsibilities.

The next scene is showing that Tony is defending himself from the rest of the member because he is trying to create a murder bot. Thor was angry at him because Tony knows nothing about

the power of the Tesseract, the essence to create Ultron. Tony said that he never knew he will create a murder bot, what he wanted is to create a robot that will help him to fight the next villain that The Avengers going to face, but instead it turns against him. He through his denial, it is shown that what he feared is already happened, his creation turn his back against him, the creator.

Through helplessness and the risk that he took, the fear was created from these several factors. It is shown that he felt helpless, fighting alongside The Avengers as he was dead before. He felt that he needs a new companion who is willing to sacrifice, without feeling guilty or afraid, in this case Ultron. He created Ultron without realized the risk that he took, he did not know anything about the Tesseract and what is inside it and yet he still continues to create a robot companion who can think and get ordered.

In this scene, denial is used to describe a situation which the person cannot accept the reality or admit the truth. When people are trying to cope with their sadness or depression, they usually try to avoid it. The Avengers had their meetings after Ultron attack at their headquarters. Everyone demands an explanation of what just happened, and they are looking out for and explanation to Tony and Bruce who is looking as confused as they are.

Alongside with his denial, he also put up his rationalization at the same time, because he does not wanted to be blame for what he did. In this rationalization he was making excuses that he created a good thing for the team and to avoid his fear and guilt so he would not lose his teammates. While denying his creation, Tony also explaining that no one is going to understand why he was failed at creating a new robot to protect and help the team is one of the proof of Rationalization.

Rationalization is a defense mechanism that uses deception to the conflict to make it less threatening by making excuse to avoid the truth. It is used by Tony to make everything is right to him. For example in this scene, Tony is creating Ultron, he knows that risk and still takes it. In the end everyone blame him for creating a murder bot and he did not want to be blamed for that. Thor was angry because Tony did not know what he was doing with the Tesseract while Tony was defending himself that Thor did not know what his intention of doing so is. While Tony is denying about his creation being failed, he also told the team that he was not being able to create something like this and did not meet the requirements to create it yet. He puts up two defense mechanisms at the same time while explaining about Ultron.

Tony is doing everything at stakes to create something to help The Avengers. It is because he has experience of dying, so he do whatever it takes to keep himself alive and not become a pawn to sacrifice. In this scene, Tony is putting up his defense mechanism because he did not want to die again just like in the last time when he brought nuke through the wormhole, that is why he makes himself right by creating Ultron. We can see the rationalization that Tony use by several evidence, he tried to rationalize his doings by telling the whole crew that he do not know if the tesseract can do such things. In that way he protected himself so he will not be blame. He brought Bruce into this matter too, with the same reason, the other teammates will not be furious if he was working with Bruce and get Bruce into accusations too, not only himself. The way he talks to Thor about why Thor will not understand why he did create Ultron is another proof that he dodging the question, because Thor knows nothing about science and technology made Tony Stark is the smartest guy in the room. He also rationalizes the situation by mentioning his past near death experience, he is talking about the nuke that he alter to destroy the army of aliens. He asked people in the room whether his sacrifices known by them and none of them are arguing about that. In this scene, he succeed putting up his defense mechanism by rationalizing his way to protect his fear and guilt towards the Ultron. The next superhero who has the same anxiety, but different defense mechanism is Thor, he has the fear of being unable

to fulfill his responsibility as a king and he is afraid that he is losing his worthiness as other people is more worthy than him.

Thor's anxiety and defense mechanism

The last superhero that suffers from anxiety is Thor. His anxiety triggers the fear that he was unable to fulfill his responsibility. As he is the rightful king of Asgard, it is certainly possible that a king is afraid of being unable to do his responsibilities to govern his kingdom. In the scene where Wanda Maximoff is putting him in a vision, he can see that the Asgardians are having a party, then Heimdall approaches him and telling him that they are going to die and it is because of Thor's power that the Asgardians suffering. With his power, he destroys every Asgardian in the room into ashes, leaving him in confusion because he kills them all including Heimdall.

This scene shows Thor's deepest anxiety just like that of Captain America and Ironman. In this scene, the Asgardians are having a party and dancing. While Heimdall is welcoming Thor, Thor is realizing that Heimdall is blind. Heimdall is telling Thor that he is leading the Asgardian to Hel, Norse mythology of Hell. Even though Thor is asking Heimdall to let him help, Heimdall refused and telling him that he is a destroyer. This vision shows that Thor is anxious if Asgard ceases to exist. That is why he wants to make sure that he will do anything he can to help Asgard and its people. Yet, because his girlfriend lives in the earth, which also needs his protection, he is anxious whether he can govern and protect Asgard, and at the same time protect the earth. His anxiety triggers the fear, the fear of being unable to do his responsibility as the protector of seven realms, including the earth, and as the kingdom of Asgard.

In this scene, Clint is curious about Thor's hammer, because as it shown in the movie, only the one who is worthy enough can lift the hammer and became the king of Asgard and protection of the seven realms. After few people tried to lift the hammer, including Tony Stark with the help of his Ironman gauntlet and War Machine's power, leaving one contestant left, which is Captain America. As everybody is cheering Captain America, Thor is smiling because he believes that he is the only one that can lift the hammer. Captain America is trying to pull the hammer and it moved a slight bit, and Thor's face is unexpectedly changed into panic, until Captain America said that he could not do it, and Thor's face is relieved that he is still the one who wield the worthy of Mjolnir.

As godly as Thor looks he has fear that he is not worthy enough to hold the Mjolnir, it is because one of the factor that triggers his fear which is ignorance. Being the only God in the team makes Thor forget that there are several people who can surpass him not only in the strength but also intelligence. Thor believes that whenever he calls Mjolnir and wields it he still become the ruler of Asgard and protector of the seven realms, but he forgot that it is not the only quality of being worthy for wielding the Mjolnir and ruling Asgard. As the only God in The Avengers, Thor feels that he is the strongest Avengers. He never thought that anyone will surpass his power in The Avengers, even though he was overpowered several times while fighting the enemies. This incident actually shows his weakness, which trigger his anxiety leading to his fear. In an effort to overcome the fear, he represses the thought of his weakness. The act of repression is a way out for him to get out of anxiety.

Repression is a defense mechanism that is used to keep the disturbing ideas or fantasies out from the conscious awareness. It is used to remove the shameful thoughts or painful memories, about something being removed from the awareness.

From those several scene above, they are showing Thor's defense mechanism which is repression. These scenes have some similarities, which is the worthiness of Thor for being the

king of Asgard and the protector of seven realms. Before the defense mechanism analysis, one of Thor's fear is not worthy enough to wield the Mjolnir. It is because of his background which the son of Odin, the previous king and the protector of seven realm. He has this burden on his shoulder that he was the best, the chosen one to protect the seven realms and being a king. This is become conflicted several times in the movie because we can see that Vision in the first picture already lift the Mjolnir, the second and third picture is Captain America moving the hammer a little bit, and the last one is his vision of Heimdall telling him that everyone in the Asgard is going to die and Thor cannot do anything to help them. To suppress this shameful feelings, Thor is always being confidence in his strength and his power to create lightning because no one in The Avengers can cope with his strengths, that is why Thor is trying to be fine when someone is more worthy than him.

CONCLUSION

The findings in these movies, *The Avengers* and *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* showed the case of three superheroes, that is Captain America, Ironman, and Thor, have their own anxieties and defense mechanism. It is shown that their anxieties produce fear and guilt. They are anxious if they are unable to fulfill their responsibility and they lose their power. The findings also show that they adopt the defense mechanism for overcoming their anxiety. The defense mechanism they adopt are denial, rationalization, and repression. They are used for coming to terms with their condition, namely, their weaknesses that they might not be able to protect human being without the help of others, as well as the possibility that they might lose their power. These fear and defense mechanism can be related and reminded us that even superheroes are like an ordinary human, filled with fears and put their defense mechanism up to prevent them from being weak emotionally.

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