

An X-Ray into the Endo-Prosthetic Superbody

Two films from the silent era set the stage for an understanding of the endo-prosthetic somatotype in certain superhero films. According to Tom Gunning (2009), Auguste and Louis Lumière's 1896 screening of *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, one of their actualities, represents the arrival of an "aesthetic of astonishment." He defines this aesthetic in terms of the spectator's awe at the transformation of a still image into a moving one. The spectator's astonishment, for Gunning, thus "derives from a magical metamorphosis rather than a seamless reproduction of reality" (740). However, this short film enacts a "magical metamorphosis" only in regards to its medium rather than its content, which features a train moving towards the camera along its z-axis, while men and women to the right of the tracks mull about the station, waiting to climb onto the train, to meet those disembarking from it, or simply to move diagonally with it as it comes to a stop. The importance of this film, then, seems to consist more in the fact that it depicts a *divergence* of forms rather than a *metamorphosis* of them, in that on one side of the screen, an object, the train, competes for our attention with the men and women on the other side of the screen (see Fig. 2.1). The movements, functions, and appearance of these two visual elements remain almost wholly independent of each other. This short film thus establishes the co-importance in the cinema of nonhuman objects and actors in the flesh, even as it radically separates the two, so that, outside of such film forms as animation or science fiction, they cannot easily metamorphose into one another onscreen—or, more accurately, unlock, reimagine, or tap into one another's virtual capacities.

However, another film from the same era more clearly depicts the "magical metamorphosis" that Gunning attributes to *L'arrivée d'un train*. Edison's 1895 series *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* features a woman in a white skirt with flowing wing-like sleeves. As she traces figure eights in the air and takes small circular steps on the studio stage, the materials of the dress swirl about, so that afterimages and swaths of color, reds, cyans, and ambers, start



Fig. 2.1 The object–human split in *L'arrivée d'un train*

to emerge from these movements. Annabelle, in other words, synthesizes the virtual capacities of an object, the skirt, with the skeleto-motor functions of our flesh to assume the “powers” of other polymorphic creatures, namely the butterfly. She mimics, for instance, the coloration of this insect; its darting, erratic motions, such as the folding, flapping, and outstretching of its wings; and its transformation from an unremarkable *mórpha* (that of the caterpillar) into one capable of striking visual arrays. The dazzling colors, coiling movements, and changeful aspects of this woman’s costume at the same time mimic those of the snake about to slough off and renew its external form (see Fig. 2.2).

This Edison short, then, offers a radically different vision of the modes of extension our flesh seems able to open up to from that of the Lumière actualities: rather than a divergence of forms, we see in this film a sort of fusion or coadunation of them, as the shimmer of the dress, its changing colors, the camera’s setup, and this woman’s arms, feet, skin, muscles, tendons, and senses combine to impersonate and fathom the qualia of nonhuman entities, such as insects, reptiles, or even early optical devices. Esther Leslie (2013) thus argues that the dancers in such films “enable the endless animated flow of material to turn and twist and display its material qualities. The fabric coils

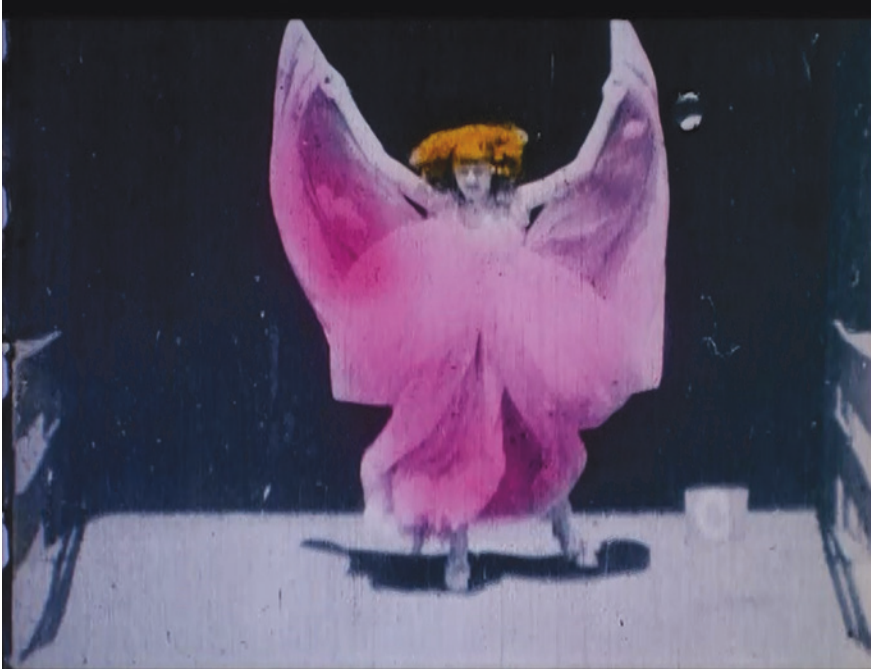


Fig. 2.2 Human-as-object in *Annabelle Serpentine Dance*

for as long as the film strip winds through the projector” (35). As Leslie suggests, the skin and motor skills of the camera subject in the *Serpentine Dance* not only discover their objective correlatives in the folds of the dress; in a sense, they fuse with them in order to share in and spectacularize the distinct “powers” of the cinema machine, namely its ability to “loop” movements and cycle through changes in chromatic intensities for viewers.

This short film thus seems one of the first to re-elaborate its main character’s tissues and appendages, extending them into areas of onscreen space usually impossible to reach and using them to re-pattern the visual composition of the *mise-en-scène*. This film, then, serves as the Ur-text for the endo-prosthetic somatotype on display in certain superhero films.¹ While it might seem wildly imprecise or ridiculous to call Annabelle a superhero, she nonetheless resembles one—although she does not act as one, of course—in that she shares the same metamorpho-physiological constitution as Thor, Captain America, or Elektra. The costume extends the contours of Annabelle’s arms and also the envelope of this woman’s skin, transforming the film’s visual register while also corporealizing the circular movements of the crank of the camera and the roll of the filmstrip that went into making it. The *Serpentine Dance*, in short, motions towards an alternate route for the cinema, one in which individual bodies and nonhuman entities commingle their forms,

capabilities, or ways of moving and occupying film space, rather than simply charting off in their own separate directions. It is this route that the superhero film in the digital age of the twenty-first century explores.

BLADE

Stephen Norrington's *Blade* (1998), the first Marvel Studios film, narrates the adventures of its title character, a vampire-human martial artist with superhuman strength, agility, endurance, and senses who can also tolerate the effects of sunlight. These superpowers stem from a unique form of cross-breeding: the villain Deacon Frost (Stephen Dorff) attacks the African-American Blade's (Wesley Snipes) expectant mother (Sanaa Lathan) on the streets, endowing the fetus with quasi-vampiric characteristics. Blade consequently vows to take revenge on vampires, especially after Abraham Whistler (Kris Kristofferson) adopts, tutors, and starts to smith weapons for the orphan. The film opens with an attractive female vampire escorting an unsuspecting man into a nightclub set inside a slaughterhouse, where strobe lights and techno music throb and pulse—in the manner of veins and arteries—over images of the twenty-somethings on the dance floor, all of whom appear affluent, decadent, and fashion-conscious. The dancers reveal themselves as vampires, orgiastic over the chance at feeding on a fresh victim, as soon as the club's sprinkler system starts to rain blood down on them. The vampires, though, right as they are about to consume their victim, suddenly stop, split into two companies—a sort of “parting of the red sea” in this abattoir setting—and feast their eyes on the appearance of Blade. The antihero wears dark armor, sunglasses, and a trench coat,² and immediately starts to massacre the vampires with a small arsenal of deadly instruments: a shotgun, a submachine gun, and a number of silver stakes that Blade throws as though they were daggers. He does not retrieve any of these weapons, which makes the character seem exo-prosthetic in somatotype, almost a more supernatural version of Batman or the Punisher. However, after running out of ammunition, Blade unsheathes a trademark weapon, a silver double-edged sword, slicing through a few remaining vampires with it. He does not forego this weapon, unlike the others; and, as if to underline this fact, Blade, smiling for a moment, slays three vampires in one motion with a shuriken with two fanglike edges. The weapon returns to Blade in a crescent motion, thus constituting this character as more tendentially endo- than exo-prosthetic—or rather, as an uneasy mix of categories, much in the way Blade mixes human and vampire traits.

After staking Frost's minion Quinn (Donal Logue) to the wall, Blade sets fire to the vampire, whom the cops then take to the morgue. Hematologist Karen Jensen (N'Bushe Wright), conducting the autopsy, revives Quinn, who tries to turn her into a vampire. Blade then shows up to finish Quinn off; as they fight, the film traces out the correspondence of Blade's costume and superpowers to the structure and functions of our teeth. First, the vampires

in the film, including Blade, wear darker colors, whereas such characters as Whistler and Karen (at least until Quinn's attack) usually wear white scrubs, undershirts, or other clothes. This visual scheme, as it color codes vampirism as a form of tooth decay, thus accounts for Blade's armor: this superhero, who must constantly resist the symptoms of vampirism, sports a costume that contains its own coat of enamel, one able to deflect the shots that the officers in the morgue fire. Blade, ignoring them, unsheathes the silver sword once again, using it to slice off Quinn's forearm. The sword and shuriken thus displace and re-elaborate the functions of our incisor and canine teeth—incidentally, the most conspicuous feature of the vampire—as they rip, tear, and cut apart other substances.³ Blade even routinely *cooks* the film's villains, sometimes with an ultraviolet flashlight of Whistler's invention, in anticipation of rendering their flesh with this sword-tooth. However, as Quinn again escapes, Blade makes a snap decision to rescue the unconscious Karen, the two of them fleeing from the cops. The camera doubles for Blade's super-sharp senses, as it speeds across rooftops, focusing on a soft surface onto which he throws Karen. Blade then vaults from one skyscraper to another, escaping from the cops, taking the slumped-over Karen to a car, and driving through the city to Whistler. The ability of Blade's sharp senses to affect the film's visual register, to ramp or alter its frame rate, again makes reference to our canine teeth, which we commonly call our *eye teeth*. In short, Blade appears able at times to *chew the scenery*, distorting its filmic capture and enabling us to complete the following formula for *Blade* and its sequels:

Teeth: Sword, Shuriken, and Armor $\propto$ Vampire Traits: Speed-ramping

The film even invites us to “chew on its scenery,” cutting to insert shots of the vistas of the cityscape, while Blade speeds to the warehouse so that Whistler can treat Karen with a serum that temporarily arrests the symptoms of vampirism.

Blade finds out from Quinn that Frost wants to resurrect La Magra, the “Blood God,” an esoteric deity that will enable the villain to rise to the top of the vampire elite. Blade, in contrast, works with Karen and Whistler to create retroviral cocktails that can cure vampirism. They sneak into a vampire temple in the film's climactic sequences, one that resembles a centrifuge⁴ in its design, and there confront Frost and a few members of the villain's cohort. Frost immediately “defangs” Blade, stealing his silver sword and extracting his blood for use in a ritual meant to reawaken La Magra. Blade ensanguinates the *mise-en-scène* of the temple, which the film match cuts to shots of the weary vampire-human draining Karen's veins in order to recover strength. The antihero then retrieves weapon in endo-prosthetic fashion, while Frost, as La Magra's vessel, changes into a digital construct—and comes to look at times like a “blood sample” in the centrifuge temple—one that seems impervious to sword-thrusts and much too fast for the superhero to react to, connect with, or even “chew over.” Blade must resort to an anticoagulant to

dissolve the “Blood God,” finish off Frost, and remove the obvious digital overlays from the film. As Blade does so, the villains *squirt blood and burst apart, almost as though they were bitten into*. The sequence ends with a much more naturalistic view of the cityscape seen from one of its rooftops, an image for Blade, Karen, and us to chew over, drink in, and savor.

Guillermo del Toro’s *Blade II* (2002) continues the first film’s exposition of the title character’s endo-prosthetic superpowers. The sequel opens in a vampire den, the Parizska Blood Bank in the Czech Republic, where a drifter enters, a scar running down the middle of the man’s chin. He feeds on those in charge of the clinic as a member of the Reapers, a mutant strain of vampire, the tongue of which unfolds into numerous tendrils that can tear into the throats of others, take sustenance from them, and deposit in them the virus that will eventually turn them into similar creatures. Eli Damaskinos (Thomas Kretschmann), the ancient ruler of the “vampire nation,” responds to this crisis, sending daughter Nyssa (Leonor Varela) to request that Blade team with the Bloodpack, a “tactical unit” of vampire soldiers, in order to stop the Reapers from multiplying, infecting everyone on earth, and then dying of starvation. However, Blade discovers from Jared Nomak (Luke Goss), the carrier of the virus, that Damaskinos oversaw its cellular engineering in an effort to immunize the vampire race against silver, anticoagulants, and ultimately sunlight. The Reapers are invulnerable to these vampire weaknesses, except for sunlight. Damaskinos therefore conspires to win Blade’s trust only to deceive, subdue, analyze, and extract tissue samples from the antihero. *Blade II* establishes another metamorpho-physiological congruence of its main character to the series’ villains: in the first film, Blade’s sword and shuriken serve as objective correlatives to the vampires’ similarly retractable canine teeth, whereas in the sequel Blade shares the Reapers’ constitution, not so much in their immunities as in their endo-prosthetic interaction with the other characters in the diegesis. Blade, for instance, throws the shuriken into the environment, from which it always returns, even after it slices through the flesh of enemies. The Reapers do much the same, only with their tongues. The film, to make this connection clear, visually analogizes its main character to one of the Reapers. Damaskinos confines Blade to an operating table similar to the one on which Nyssa autopsies a Reaper (see Figs. 2.3; 2.4). Nyssa also determines that the Reaper differs from Blade and other vampires, in that its mouth secretes neurotoxic saliva, communicates the mutant virus, and can stretch wide apart, since it contains no mandible. Blade thus shares in common with the Reapers the fact that other vampires consider them freaks.

The first action sequence in the film features Blade rescuing Whistler from the clutches of the vampires in Eastern Europe. The film, as its main character stages a virtuoso martial arts exhibition for the camera, at times stylizes the action through the technique of time slicing. The visual distortion or rending, shredding, or chewing over of the image thus once more accompanies



Fig. 2.3 The autopsy of a Reaper in *Blade II*



Fig. 2.4 The correspondence of Blade to the Reapers in *Blade II*

a sequence that re-elaborates some of the functions, distinguishing characteristics, and cultural meanings of our incisor teeth. Additionally, after Blade throws the silver shuriken at a vampire motorcyclist, the camera detaches from its objective viewpoint and follows it through several alleyways as it closes in on its target, ricochets about corners, and ultimately returns to its owner. The camera repeats this trick in a fight scene in Whistler's workshop, where Blade spares with Nyssa and another member of the Bloodpack. In

effect, these two moments in the film square its visual fields to its main character's endo-prosthetic abilities. The shuriken comes to seem an extension of Blade's flesh—specifically, the front teeth, which also enlarge and retract in the mouths of vampires—returning to it from distant areas of diegetic space.

Moreover, *Blade II* expands or rather, truer to its title, doubles the superhero's repertoire of endo-prosthetic weapons. For example, while rescuing Whistler, Blade attacks a number of vampires with two silver stilettos, clutching one in each fist, that displace his canine fangs. Then, in a fight with Nomak in the city sewers, Blade wears demi-gauntlets with retractable claws that can inject an anticoagulant into the vampires that they strike (the Reapers, though, merely shrug off its effects). The members of the Bloodpack, in contrast, only display the exo-prosthetic abilities typical of action-horror film characters. They use rifles, machineguns, and silver stakes on their enemies; one of them even impales a Reaper with a sword, never taking the trouble to retrieve it onscreen. Reinhardt (Ron Perlman), the most racist, callous, and treacherous member of the Bloodpack, steals Blade's silver sword, narratively "defanging" or incapacitating the superhero for a short while again. Reinhardt fires a few silver stakes at Blade, attempting to finish the antihero off in a contest of the exo- and endo-prosthetic. Blade survives, recovers the silver sword, and slices Reinhardt in two, so that the villain splits entirely apart in a caricature of the Reapers' mouths. Most interestingly, in order to set matters right, Blade restores to the film's narrative, thematic, and visual economies the splitting functions specific to our teeth: Nomak, rather than replacing Damaskinos as the chief of the vampire nation, decides to commit suicide during a final confrontation with Blade, virtually falling on the superhero's sword. An insert shot, appropriately enough, shows the silver sword splitting apart Nomak's major organs from the inside out,⁵ operating in much the way our incisors do when they chomp down into meat and tear it open.

David S. Goyer's *Blade: Trinity* (2004) finds the superhero radically out-of-place in the 9/11 era, or, even worse, in danger of surrendering to "the thirst," the vampires' name for their unconscionable victimization of others. The film opens with criminal psychologist Edgar Vance (John Michael Higgins) on a nighttime talk show opining that Blade is trying to "kill aspects of himself," which seems relatable to his struggle against the thirst that all vampires feel. Blade, now seen as a conspiracy theorist and serial murderer, clashes with the FBI and a score of vampire social climbers, who wage a media campaign against the antihero at the same time that they manage to revive Dracula (Dominic Purcell), the remains of whom they discover inside an Iraqi ziggurat in the Syrian desert. After the FBI storm the workshop and shoot down Whistler, they capture and "extract" Blade's sword-tooth, taking it away. Vance, a familiar, tranquilizes Blade while in custody, sticking a needle in the superhero's neck in imitation of a vampire's fangs. Vance means to deliver Blade to Danica Talos (Parker Posey) and the other vampires. However, the Night Stalkers (their name a tribute to John Llewellyn Moxey's *The*

Night Stalker, a 1972 television film about a vampire), a “sleeper cell” consisting of ex-vampire Hannibal King (Ryan Reynolds) and Whistler’s daughter Abigail (Jessica Biel), rescue Blade from the FBI facility. The superhero shakes off the effects of the tranquilizer, deserts them for a significant amount of screen time as they make their escape, and finally reunites with them on the streets, crashing through an upper story window while claspings a silvery object. The viewer realizes where Blade went, as he shows off the trademark weapon and then matter-of-factly says, “Forgot my sword.”

The film then cuts to an insert shot of the time-lapse view of the city’s skyline, once again chewing the scenery up for the viewer to relish. *Blade: Trinity* thus reprises, in its own way, the stylistic features of the first two entries in the series, even as it redevelops the endo-prosthetic connection of our teeth to its main character’s weaponry. Blade, for example, in the film’s opening action set-piece, uses a new stiletto design, spearing a vampire with it and then retracting it with a wire. In fact, throughout the first act of the film, Blade’s eye and canine teeth constantly flash, as he chases after vampires atop the tractor-trailer of a semi-truck, careens through a tunnel after them in a car, and finally surrenders to the FBI in despair over Whistler’s death. These images clue us into the relation of the retractable weapons that the character uses in these action sequences to the contours, functions, sheen, and sharpness of our teeth. Also, the Night Stalkers, unlike the all-vampire Blood-pack from *Blade II*, resemble the superhero in their endo-prosthetic abilities, although none more so than Abigail Whistler. The film, for the first time in the series, reserves a martial arts sequence for one of its side characters; in it, she confronts in a subway terminal a small coterie of vampire skateboarders, out to attack an easy target. They choose Abigail, since she cradles a newborn, an allusion to the scene in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992) in which Lucy Westenra carries an infant to feast on into a crypt. However, Abigail tosses aside the fake doll and dispatches them with a silver switchblade, which flicks out and then retracts into the toe of her footwear. In other fight scenes, she wears metal gauntlets that can extrude the spikes inside them, and she also carries an ultraviolet arc, which, whenever she activates it, forms a shaft of radiation that disintegrates vampires upon contact. The film establishes Blade’s and Abigail’s common somatotype in a climactic action sequence that sees the two of them storming the offices of Danica Talos and the other followers of Dracula, this time to rescue Hannibal King from them. As Blade slays several vampires with the silver shuriken in one sweep, Abigail does the same with the UV arc. At about the same time that she shuts the arc down and shoulders it once again, the shuriken returns on its own to Blade, each item reintegrating with the rest of their owners’ costumes—or rather their endo-prosthetic corporealities.

Dracula, though, appears a more ecto-prosthetic villain in constitution, a shape-shifter able to wear other skins throughout the film, including those of Dr. Edgar Vance, Abraham Whistler, and a Reaper-like monster. The Night

Stalkers seek to extract a DNA sample from Dracula, rather than the vampires trying to take one from Blade, as in the other two films, in order to create a “Daystar” virus from it that will wipe out the entire vampire species. Hannibal King facetiously describes the virus to Danica Talos: “It’s a new flavor crystal formula, twice the chocolaty goodness, half the calories. Plus, it helps prevent tooth decay.” These snippets of throwaway dialogue actually work to indicate some of the metamorpho-physiological reasons as to why Blade always wears such a dark costume. The superhero, whom the series depicts as constantly at risk of succumbing to “the thirst”—to the cravings of the vampire—therefore seems to always teeter on the edge of moral, emotional, and sociobiological decay. Dracula, even in defeat, exploits this weakness: after their swordfight, Blade shoves an arrow with a capsule full of the Daystar virus into the villain, who, while dying, says, “I don’t need to survive. The future of our race lies with you.” A virtual camera follows the arrow as it slips inside Dracula’s major organs, tracking the viral agents within them that start to rapidly multiply, infest the air in the office complex, and cause the other vampires they come into contact with to rot away. The virus coats, discolors, and digitally stains the *mise-en-scène*, much in the way a biofilm or sheath of microorganisms coats our teeth, threatening to demineralize them in the event an ecologic shift on their surface occurs. The return of Dracula upsets the diegesis of the *Blade* series, the vampire successfully corrupting the title superhero, much as tooth decay, discoloration, and attrition set in when the dental culture of our mouths changes for the worse.

The ending of the film’s two major release versions establishes this corruption of the superhero. In the theatrical cut, the Daystar virus destroys Blade; when the FBI conducts an autopsy on the corpse, though, it transforms into Dracula. In the director’s cut, Dracula disappears as the FBI deliver Blade’s corpse to the morgue. He revives on the autopsy table, almost feeds on a nurse, and speeds off in a car. This ending remains ambiguous, as we cannot determine for certain whether Blade remains a superhero; turns into a true vampire, indulging in “the thirst”; or is actually Dracula in disguise. The film, though, through its *mise-en-scène* compositions, favors this Blade-as-Dracula interpretation. As Danica Talos and the other members of the vampire elite manage to reawaken Dracula in the film’s opening scene, a chiaroscuro effect starts to dance across the walls, cellars, and cornices of the Iraqi ziggurat. This effect occurs two more times throughout the narrative. As Dracula, in the form of Abraham Whistler, invades the Night Stalkers’ industrial facilities, the chiaroscuro contrasts return, even if the “return” of Blade’s mentor, colleague, and weapons manufacturer in this scene appears no more than a ruse. As the corpse of Blade revives under the observation of the FBI’s medics, the varying intensities of the chiaroscuro effect simultaneously illuminate and shade over the features of the morgue, the same way that they do in the earlier scene inside the ziggurat. The Blade that reawakens on the operating slab, in other words, *is not necessarily the same character as the one in the rest of the*

series, much as the Abraham Whistler who returns in the middle of the film is not the same Whistler as the one in its first act. This Blade, whether Dracula or not, in any case appears willing to consider victimizing others, such as the nurse. The dark areas of the images that shift and waver across the screen in these sequences visually connect Blade's corruption to the cavitation and spotting of our teeth, the template for the character's superpowers. Dracula, as the shape-shifting "biofilm" of *Blade: Trinity*, in effect disturbs the film's visual-ecologic surfaces, inducing a form of rot in the formula that outlines its main character's superheroic somatotype:

Tooth Decay: Dark Costume $\propto$ Vampirism: Dark Chiaroscuro Effects

Dracula attacks Blade at the spot at which superheroes seem most vulnerable: in their re-elaboration of the structure, functions, and appearance of one of our major corpora. He induces "tooth decay" in Blade, who now feeds on soft foods (taken from the arteries of victims) rather than reproducing in the form of an array of silver weapons the sheen, toughness, and cuspidate features of the enamel of our teeth.

Whether or not Blade suffers defeat in the fight against the more vampiric "aspects of himself," this character's series remains unique and remarkable among superhero films, not only for incorporating elements of supernatural fiction in them. More importantly, it reconceptualizes the objectal qualities of our teeth, the fact that they share much of the same texture, contours, durability, smoothness, sharpness, and serration of the swords, stilettos, and shurikens that Blade uses against the antagonists in these films. In other words, these films open up speculation as to the "hermeneutic circle," to quote Graham Harman (2010), that these objects, in their correspondence to one another, if not in their equivalence or coterminous relationship, form (100). The *Blade* series enables us to short-circuit its identificatory mechanisms, inviting us to ask not "What is it like to be Blade?" so much as "What might it be like *to be like a blade*?" The action stylistics, special effect techniques, and frame rate adjustments in the series allow us to fathom some of the mysterious or noumenal qualities of such an object, without sucking "all the juice" out of it, as Harman says, in a vampire-like choice of words (100). For example, our eyes follow the shuriken as it flies though the air and through the flesh of Blade's enemies, an impossible spectator position that nonetheless allows us to trace the flight arc, aerodynamic thrust, and impactful solidity of this weapon.⁶ In any case, Blade, much as with the shuriken, also flies and flutters about diegetic space, running, vaulting, dodging, and using martial arts in quick, clean, surgical movements reminiscent of those of a "blade" cutting through another object. The frequent shots of this character's front teeth, then, more than suggest their ratio correspondence to these weapons and displays of skill. They more importantly suggest that it is only through the structure, functions, and microbiota of the teeth, through these objects in our mouths that we might not often think about, that we can start

to develop some sense of the more occult ontological features of sharp metals. The *Blade* series opens wide to a serious consideration of the circle of object-object relations, if, as Harman or Jane Bennett might ask us to do, we treat our teeth as mineral objects, as an aspect of ourselves with something in common with Blade's silver tools. This consideration enables us to sink our teeth into a nonhuman existence, although to sample no more than a small taste of an inner experience not our own.

DAREDEVIL

Mark Steven Johnson's *Daredevil* (2003) opens *in medias res*, with a scene of the title character sliding down a wire—a "lifeline," in other words—into the altar space of a Catholic cathedral in Hell's Kitchen to recover from injuries and fatigue. Father Everett (Derrick O'Connor), a minister sympathetic to Daredevil's vigilante cause, enters the frame and unmask the fallen superhero, revealing the face of defense attorney Matthew Murdock (Ben Affleck), who slides into unconsciousness. The camera closes in on Murdock's face, seemingly moving through it, as though entering the neuroanatomical circuits of the character's memories. The film then relates the events that were to trigger the nearly unconscious Daredevil's descent into the cathedral: Murdock's chance meeting with Elektra Natchios (Jennifer Garner), the daughter of a financier with ties to the Kingpin (Michael Clarke Duncan), the crime czar of New York City; the murder of Elektra's father, whom the Irish villain Bullseye (Colin Farrell) assassinates for reneging on a deal with the Kingpin; Elektra's wounding of Daredevil, whom she fights after wrongly accusing the superhero of the murder; and finally Daredevil's escape from Bullseye, who interrupts the fight scene, wrests a sai from Elektra, and fatally runs it through her midriff and chest. However, the film also embeds another flashback sequence within this rather extensive flashback sequence, one that recounts Murdock's acquisition of a special "radar sense" as an adolescent after a chemical spill deprives him of eyesight. He afterwards trains in martial arts, developing the sensorimotor habits of superhuman embodiment with the assistance of these new senses, which can detect from considerable distances extremely faint sounds, odors, tastes, or tactile impressions; feel minute changes in temperature and others' emotional states; and create accurate three-dimensional maps of the film's settings and *mise-en-scène* constructions as a form of internal vision. Murdock fully commits to using these abilities to fight crime after a mobster murders the child's father, Jack "The Devil" Murdock (David Keith), for refusing to take a dive in a boxing match.

A curious digital effects insert occurs after the chemicals inside the drums sitting atop a truck splash across Murdock's eyes, as the camera follows the neuropathic aftereffects of the accident as they shoot into the adolescent's eye sockets, up through the optical nerves, inflaming and discoloring them, and then into the rest of the central nervous system. This sequence thus

constructs a connectome, or a digital map, of the thalamo-cortical matrices and the fibrous, neuronal, and synaptic networks inside Murdock's nervous system. The digital alteration of these networks appears to travel further and further, ostensibly down into Murdock's spinal columns, since connectomics seeks to trace the cellular and dendritic complexion of the entire nervous system. The accident, though, more than irreparably damaging Murdock's eyes, soon amplifies the child's muscle movement, neuromotor control, fine touch sensation, and sensitivity to stimuli imperceptible to most of us. The route that the digital effects travel thus offers us a clue as to the reason for the development of these new abilities: the chemicals, we can assume, interact with the *anterior and dorsal horns* of the spinal column, exaggerating their functions and recoding them into Daredevil's specific superpowers.

The anterior horn, after all, contains the somatic motor neurons that activate our muscle fibers. Its chemical modification in the film thus accounts for the upsurges in Murdock's muscle tone, forcefulness, and resistance to fatigue. The dorsal horn controls our sensitivity to vibrations, tactile-haptic impressions, and muscle memories. It also receives messages from the receptors in our skin, muscles, tendons, and skeletons to inform our sense of proprioception, the sense of spatial orientation that allows us to make swift adjustments to external forces so that we can, for example, walk across a room while closing our eyes. The film's re-elaboration of the functions of the dorsal horn compensates Murdock's sightlessness with near-superhuman equilibrium, reaction time, and sensorimotor coordination. Moreover, this radar sense seems to re-elaborate the mechanisms of our "sixth sense," a common name for our proprioception, in that it uses the vibrations in the film's diegetic spaces to map the objects, structures, and other characters in them, enabling Daredevil to visualize them and easily move about. In fact, Murdock's eyes, a milky whitish in color, do more than signify the attorney-crime-fighter's disability. They seem almost the very color of the grey matter in the tracts of our spinal columns, so as to suggest to the viewer that when Daredevil "sees," he does so through the afferent fibers of the somatic sensory system, which sends information to the spinal columns, rather than the retina.

The superhuman abilities of Daredevil thus seem the correlatives of some of the functions and morphological features of our neurospinal interiors. However, Daredevil's costume also transcodes these same features. The character wears a suit of a rust-reddish color, with "devil's horns" at the temples of its mask. These two horns seem most indicative of the spine's anterior and dorsal horns, those sections of our spinal cords responsible for our muscle movement and our sense of proprioception, that sixth sense of spatial orientation and adaptation most analogous to Daredevil's radar-like sense of echolocation in the film. Of course, the spine and the cerebral and cerebellar cortices must continuously communicate with one another in order for us to control our movements, register sensations, and react to certain stimuli. The cerebellum—most notably, its inner "rust-colored layer," corresponding

in color to Daredevil's outfit—contributes to our coordination, equilibrium, accurate timing, and development of new motor habits or reflexes. Thus Daredevil's costume, fighting skills, and fast movements visualize the otherwise unapparent functions, structures, and relays of our central nervous system, and furthermore enable us to set forth this formula for understanding the film's depiction of the character's endo-prosthetic superpowers:

Spinal Horns: Devil's Horns $\propto$ Radar Sense: Digital Schematics

One additional horn of the spinal column deserves our attention, though, and then we can start to unpack this formula in relation to specific scenes, images, and special effects from the film. The lateral horn, that triangular outgrowth in the middle of the anterior and dorsal sections of our spinal cords, regulates the flight-or-fight response of our autonomic nervous system. Daredevil also wears something on the middle of the costume that similarly sticks out, something that similarly sets in motion the film's fight sequences or its daring escapes from dangerous situations: the clubs that double as a walking stick in Murdock's civilian identity.

This weaponizable cane, in short, functions as an extension and re-elaboration of our flight-or-fight reflexes. Daredevil can configure it into two clubs to use in close combat or to strike down others from a distance. He also can turn it into a staff to swing at enemies or deflect their attacks. Murdock uses it in such a manner in an impromptu sparring match with Elektra near a couple of teeter-totters upon their first meeting with each other. Finally, Daredevil can detach a cable from the clubs, using them to trip or strangle enemies, to immobilize or reposition them, or escape to certain areas of diegetic space inaccessible to them, as in the opening sequence in the cathedral. These two clubs seem to define Daredevil's somatotype as endo-prosthetic, in that they release a correlative of the character's corpora—in this case, the spinal horns—into the distant reaches of film space, even into off-screen space, only to return to mark the successful completion of a task. For example, Daredevil recovers enough at the church to confront Bullseye, who intends to finish the assassination attempt. Daredevil, during their fight, throws the clubs, smacks Bullseye with them, and immediately retrieves them, which altogether serves to contrast the superhero's abilities to those of the villain. Bullseye, who appears able to throw any item, from shurikens to syringe needles, with deadly, near-perfect accuracy, more so conforms to the exo-prosthetic somatotype, since he does not take the trouble to retrieve any of these items, nor do they ever return to him on their own. Bullseye also sports a series of scars in the shape of a crosshairs; they appear right above his eyes. These two adversaries, then, engage in a sort of contest, matching one type of superbody against another, one that relies on vision and another that redefines it.

In one of the most stunning reversals in superhero cinema, Bullseye manages to co-opt and take advantage of Daredevil's endo-prosthetic use of the

clubs. The Kingpin commissions Bullseye to murder Elektra's father, and Daredevil attempts to save this man in a sequence throughout which the assassin chases after Nikolas Natchios (Erick Avari) on a motorcycle. Daredevil throws one of the clubs in order to incapacitate Bullseye, who dodges it as it flies through the air in slow motion only to impale Natchios fatally. Afterwards Elektra wrongly accuses Daredevil of the murder and seeks revenge. Aside from the dramatic irony of Daredevil, once a witness to Jack Murdock's murder, causing the death of someone else's father, this turn of events suggests a misfire in his sympathetic nervous response to this situation. For this one moment in the film, Daredevil cannot stop, cancel out, redirect, or retrieve the club once it is thrown, as he simply does not enjoy the same control over it as Thor does over the war-hammer Mjölnir. The sequence, in other words, turns Daredevil's endo-prosthetic skills to Bullseye's exo-prosthetic advantage. Each of the two flashback sequences in the film ends with the death of a father, which more interestingly occurs in connection with the failure of one of Murdock's senses—first, the child's vision, then the crime-fighter's flight-or-fight reflexes. The remainder of the action scenes in *Daredevil* therefore seeks to right its title character's endo-prosthetic abilities, to show the superhero using the clubs to reassert control over the shape of the film's narrative, diegetic space, and digital *mise-en-scène*.

Over the course of the fight in the cathedral, Daredevil manages to evade Bullseye's projectiles and, unlike in the earlier chase scene, to retrieve the clubs after throwing them, so that villain cannot again use them against their owner. Daredevil also uses the clubs more resourcefully, detaching the cable from them, wrapping it across Bullseye's neck, and then reeling the villain into closer striking range so that their fight can reach its climactic moment. After thus expanding upon the endo-prosthetic functions of these clubs, the superhero detects from afar an FBI sniper atop an office tower and draws Bullseye into the train of the rifle-fire. The sniper's shots rip through each of Bullseye's palms, so that they take on the appearance of stigmata. This fight sequence does more than solidify and contrast its main characters' somatotypes; its religious tropes, which refashion a sociopath into a martyr and an angelic defense attorney into a "devil," indicate a *transcendent dimension* undergirding the film's visual regime, one that requires a supplement to our normal vision to "see." This dimension, rather than a supernatural one, appears to us in the form of the sympathetic attunement of Daredevil's non-visual somatosensory mechanisms to the digital composition of the film's sets, tracking shots, and special effects sequences.

After detecting the sniper, Daredevil connects into the digital underside of the film's ostensibly realistic sets, following the sightline of a rifle shot in a way a conventional camera, as well as our normal sense of vision, can never do and then manipulating the narrative action accordingly in order to win the fight against the supervillain. These images suggest the endo-prosthetic nature of Daredevil's radar and other superhuman senses, which radiate

outwards in all directions, into off-screen space or even the invisible dimensions of onscreen space, only to return to the character's central nervous system, conveying diegetic information that might affect the direction of the film's narrative. *Daredevil* thus uses these senses to "see" whether court witnesses or criminal suspects tell the truth, monitoring changes in their cardiac rates; to "see" the correct cause of a murder case, reconstructing its sequence of events from minute details at a crime scene that the police ignore; and to "see" the traces of written evidence atop a desk table, even after someone tries to erase them. As Murdock touches these artifacts or uses radar on them, our apperception of the film's visuals changes, so that we too can see the inside of a man's chest or a murder unfolding as it once took place, areas usually off-limits to our eyes.

Murdock's walking cane certainly invites comparison to the one Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2014) writes about in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. He argues that to "habituate oneself" to such objects as walking canes "is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate in the voluminosity of one's own body" (144, 145). More radically, Merleau-Ponty dedifferentiates vision from the ability to see. Since we can still visualize "different segments of the body" that certain objects might obscure (as shoes obscure our feet), and since we can even visualize those segments we cannot directly see (for example, the tightening of our muscles), Merleau-Ponty argues that "we do not recognize through vision what we have nevertheless often seen, and conversely we recognize immediately the visual representation of what is invisible in one's own body" (150, 151). Brian Massumi, taking a cue from Merleau-Ponty, argues that vision "always cofunctions with other senses," and that the ears, the tongue, the nose, and the mechanoreceptors of the skin and muscles combine with it to shape our empirical-phenomenal experience (145, 157). Massumi (2002) expounds on the virtual and intermodal dimensions of vision, further arguing that vision emerges from the co-modulation of two forms of movement: the feeling of movement endogenous to the flesh and the chaotic movement of external visual elements, which our retinas, if set apart from our motor functions and other senses, will experience as fogginess or nothingness (146, 149). Massumi claims that we only see objects due to the slowness of our own movement in contradistinction to that of the "sea of chaos" out of which they crystallize to us from moment-to-moment (149, 150). Our sense of distance, spatial distinction, the variation of objects, and the separateness of our flesh from them derives from a sort of feedback circuit, as the central nervous system sends its relative slowness "out there," which returns to it as an "outside of things" so that, according to Massumi, "the body may now appear to itself as a bounded object among others" (150). *Daredevil*, though, does not subtract the other senses from vision; rather, through the conceit of its sightless main character—and also the apt nickname of sidekick "Foggy" Nelson (Jon Favreau)—it subtracts the slowness of our usual experience of what appears to us "out there" from its

visual regime, with the film, or at least certain sequences in it, speeding up as a result.⁷

Daredevil's radar sense, in short, refigures the feedback circuits and synesthetic workings of our visual-haptic registers, as it traces "what is invisible in one's own body" onto the film's *mise-en-scène* compositions. The superhero, who without eyesight nonetheless moves, reacts, and manipulates items much more quickly than the ordinary criminals in the film's action set-pieces, seems able to do so while discerning the vibrations in the film's chaotic environments. He "takes up residence" in them as echoes of the messenger functions of the cerebrospinal system, and uses them to map the emplacement of certain objects, obstacles, and other characters in the diegesis. *Daredevil* treats these vibrations as its true virtual or transcendent dimension, often switching to a digital rendering of its *mise-en-scène* elements in order to create onscreen a visual analogue for the sense operations of its main character. Two scenes in the film, in fact, underline Daredevil's ability to tap into its digital underside, repurpose it as a compensatory form of vision, and determine the outcome of certain narrative moments.⁸ Murdock, on a rooftop with Elektra during a clear night, senses a change in the weather, as rain then starts to shower the couple. Murdock uses the increase in atmospheric vibrations that the rain-drops effect to create a digital clone of Elektra. He strokes its face upon seeing it, a reminder that, for Merleau-Ponty, the inner eye confounds our senses of sight and touch (see Fig. 2.5).

Then, after Elektra's death and Bullseye's incapacitation, Daredevil sneaks into the office of the Kingpin for the film's final fight sequence. Throughout it, the Kingpin mostly trounces Daredevil, due to his fatigue and injuries. However, after activating the sprinkler system in the office, Daredevil manages to turn the tide, using the vibrations from the water-drops to create another digital clone, this time of the villain, so as to track its movements, counter its attacks, and finally strike it down. These two scenes, so important



Fig. 2.5 The "inner eye" of *Daredevil*

to *Daredevil's* narrative resolution, feature the superhero turning the film inside out, revealing that its sets are really only the more static expressions of the virtual "chaos" that subtends and informs them. Moreover, as their (re) conversion to their digital form suggests, these sets, as well as the objects, characters, and cinematographic compositions in them, are really only the qualia, the sense stimulations, that Murdock's nervous system encodes and transduces.

At first sight, then, *Daredevil's* somatotype seems decidedly endo-prosthetic, as he feels out the near, distant, and even faint reaches of diegetic space in order to spatialize "echoes" of it, reprocess them as visual schemata, and thus determine the shape, density, and location of the objects in it. He also tends to throw the clubs at opponents or their cable attachments into the Hell's Kitchen cityscape, which always return in the course of the film's action spectacles. However, at one telltale moment in the cathedral sequence, Bullseye discovers *Daredevil's* weakness. He accidentally rings the church-bells, the ear-splitting sounds of which throw off *Daredevil's* radar sense, sense of equilibrium, and fighting savvy. This scene thus seems to complicate our understanding of *Daredevil's* somatotype, adding an epi-prosthetic component to it, since that which can disturb the vibrations in the film's settings in turn can disturb this superhero's ability to function. The epi-prosthetic superbodily transposes its organs, appendages, or cell structures into diegetic space, all the while maintaining a connection to them, so that to damage or impair one might damage or impair the other. Similarly, *Daredevil's* radar sense transposes the mechanoreceptors of the spine into the film's *mise-en-scène*, turning it into a digital connectome of the character's neuromotor relation to its elements. Although interfering with the vibrations—or, in Massumi's words, the echoes of what is "out there"—in the film's settings will interfere with *Daredevil's* radar sense, dampening this superpower or otherwise incapacitating this character will not affect these vibrations in the slightest. The traces of writing atop a desk or the evidence in a crime scene might remain unseen to reporter Ben Urich (Joe Pantoliano) or Foggy Nelson; they still remain detectable to someone with Murdock's superhuman abilities. *Daredevil's* superpowers, in short, do not seem two-way enough for us to describe them as truly epi-prosthetic.

Thus the two clubs double the two horns on *Daredevil's* mask for a reason: they altogether reimagine the insides of our spinocerebellar tracts as endo-prosthetic in their structures and functions. Much as the anterior and dorsal horns regulate our spatial orientation and motor response and articulation, *Daredevil's* radar sense extends his nervous system's mechanoreceptors outwards into diegetic space, which return in the form of 3D maps, character facsimiles, or information about changes in temperatures, emotional states, chemical compositions, and weather conditions, allowing him to adapt to the situational demands of the action onscreen. However, the mechanisms of echolocation, the closest cousin to *Daredevil's* radar sense we can imagine,

vastly differ from those of our neurospinal-kinesthetic messenger functions, so much so that we may seriously question the analogization of the two. Thomas Nagel (1974), after all, famously argues in “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” that animal echolocation “is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess” (438). Nagel, though, in a series of thoughts with uncanny relevance to *Daredevil*, even more than to the *Batman* films, tasks us to overcome this sort of subjectivism:

At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination—without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject. This should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the imagination. [...] We would have to develop such a phenomenology to describe the sonar experiences of bats; but it would also be possible to begin with humans. One might try, for example, to develop concepts that could be used to explain to a person blind from birth what it was like to see. (449)

All of us, though, appear “blind from birth” to the workings of our inner spinal columns and our tactile sixth sense. *Daredevil* allows us to “see” them through a digital simulation of the adolescent Murdock’s deadening optic nerves, and then through the adult Daredevil’s remapping of the film’s environments. Through its analogies, the film allows us to think the sense of echolocation, although not through reference to other animals, radar machines, or the fanciful abilities of a superhero. *Daredevil* allows us to think its title character’s radar sense in relation to the “virtual powers” of our own nervous systems, to develop concepts with more of a feel for the inner workings of our flesh, that “object among others” shut out from our view and so incomprehensible to us as a result.

The Netflix series *Marvel’s Daredevil* (Steven S. DeKnight 2015), even though it serves as a reboot, nonetheless retains several elements of the 2003 film. The series again recounts the character’s origins, from the accident that confers superpowers on the future vigilante to the murder of Jack Murdock (John Patrick Hayden) for refusing to throw a fight; again digitally renders the *mise-en-scène* compositions, so as to simulate the character’s radar sense from a first-person viewpoint; and again introduces into the character’s mythos fellow advocate “Foggy” Nelson (Elden Henson), reporter confidante Ben Urich (Vondie Curtis-Hall), and Wilson Fisk, the Kingpin of Crime (Vincent D’Onofrio). The series follows the exploits of Matt Murdock (Charlie Cox), who fights the Russian mafia, the Yakuza, and a Chinese cartel in order to watch over Karen Page (Deborah Ann Woll), a whistleblower for Union Allied, a scandal-ridden front for Fisk’s criminal ambitions to gentrify Hell’s Kitchen. Meanwhile, Karen and Foggy work to investigate the coercive measures Fisk uses to evict the residents of certain apartment complexes, while Murdock’s former martial arts mentor Stick (Scott Glenn) enlists him to fight the Japanese, who, under the direction of the ninja Nobu (Peter

Shinkoda), want to smuggle some sort of occult weapon into the city. Nobu severely injures Daredevil in the course of their fight, even though the superhero manages to win it, setting the Yakuza member on fire. After convalescing under the care of nurse ally Claire Temple (Rosario Dawson), Murdock convinces the criminal engineer, Melvin Potter (Matt Gerald), to construct a costume that can double as a suit of armor, complete with a set of throwing clubs. Murdock, in the final episode, dons the costume, defeats Fisk after a vicious fight, and turns the villain over to the authorities. Until this climactic moment, Murdock wears a mere stocking mask and ninja-like outfit throughout the series; thus he does not seem much different from the martial artists in such films as *The Octagon* (Eric Karson, 1980), *Enter the Ninja* (Menahem Golan, 1981), *Ninja Assassin* (James McTiegie, 2009), and *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* (Stephen Sommers, 2009), some of whom exhibit mystical or otherwise extraordinary abilities themselves. *Marvel's Daredevil*, though, changes in tenor and visual style once its main character dresses in costume. The series, in other words, shifts away from the vigilante-martial arts to the superhero action (sub)genre, since, once Murdock embraces the Daredevil moniker, costume, and accouterments, *everything changes*.

The first twelve episodes of the series nonetheless contain a few moments that showcase Murdock's extraordinary skillset and radar sense. The Russian mafia abducts an adolescent, much the same age as Murdock was upon acquiring superhuman senses, in order to trap the meddlesome vigilante. After using these senses to detect one of the mafia's underlings snooping inside Claire Temple's apartment complex, Murdock subdues and threatens to drop the man from the rooftop unless he receives some information as to the abductee's whereabouts. The criminal complies; then Murdock ventures into a warehouse, overpowers a number of mafia watchmen, and rescues the adolescent from them. The most remarkable fact about this set-piece, though, is that most of the action in it occurs off-screen—the viewer only overhears the fight scenes and must infer from the sounds that Murdock one-sidedly wins them, coldcocking the watchmen and rendering them unconscious. The Netflix series thus simulates for the viewer its main character's superhuman senses much differently than the 2003 *Daredevil*. That film relies on our *eyes* in order to digitally re-present its diegetic environments and clue us into what they might appear like to Murdock, whereas the series relies on our *ears* to receive off-screen chunks of narrative and diegetic information, almost as though we too were sightless, much as with this vigilante character. This fight scene, in which Murdock mows through several criminals in a corridor and in two rooms off-screen, underlines one of the vital faculties of our equilibrio-proprioception missing from the 2003 film. Murdock's radar sense, after all, exaggerates our own "sixth sense," as it relies on the stimulation of our muscle spindles and our neurospinal receptors. However, this sixth sense, usually in tandem with our ocular reflexes, also relies on the stimulation of the fluids in the semicircular canals of our inner ears. Murdock's superhuman

sense of spatial orientation overcodes the visual style and formal operations of the fight scene, as they compel us to experience it as Murdock might, since we too must trust our ears, not our eyes, to make sense of what transpires throughout it. The camera even moves in semicircular motions during the action onscreen, as though it were tracing the contours of the inner ears, those inputs of our vestibular system that set the stage for Murdock's incredible displays of muscle movement, coordination, responsiveness, acceleration, and steadiness.

Outside of the accident that fries Murdock's optical nerves, the 2003 *Daredevil* does not touch all that much on our nociception, or our ability to transmit information about noxious or destructive stimuli via the nerve fibers of the spine's dorsal horns, which in turn synapses this information to the thalamus, somatosensory cortex, and other areas of the midbrain. Maybe this oversight (so to speak) is due to the fact that the film emphasizes the miraculous circumstances ironically surrounding its "devil" character's acquisition of superpowers: that the accident to Murdock's central nervous system actually enhances his sensorimotor skills, rather than impairs, deteriorates, or continues to afflict them. This explanation also works for the Netflix *Daredevil*, even though Murdock's radar sense only digitizes the *mise-en-scène* one time in the entire series. Murdock, while convalescing from the fight with Nobu, explains to nurse Temple the operations of this radar sense. As the camera shifts to capture Murdock's first-person viewpoint, an ochre digital aura engulfs a medium close-up of Temple, making it appear as if CG flames were emanating from her skin, as the dialogue from the scene indicates:

Murdock: I can't see, not like everyone else, but I can feel. Things like balance and direction, micro-changes in air density, vibrations, blankets of temperature variations. Mix all that with what I hear, subtle smells. All of the fragments form a sort of impressionistic painting.

Temple: Ok, but what does that look like? Like, what do you actually see?

Murdock: A world on fire.

This specific rendition of Murdock's radar sense more than accents the "Hell" in Hell's Kitchen; it also more than surrounds Temple in a digital aureole, making this woman appear as an "angel" next to the title character's "devil" (see Fig. 2.6). More interestingly, this special effects insert suggests that Murdock's nervous system inverts the usual functions of our nociception: rather than encoding disagreeable stimuli into sense-impressions that we can feel distress over or shrink away from, Murdock's radar sense indicates *that the world is in pain, that the surfaces of the diegesis are on fire with it*. The city, this insert shot suggests, thus needs a superhero that can "feel its pain" and take the appropriate measures to alleviate it.



Fig. 2.6 The “world on fire” to Matt Murdock in *Marvel’s Daredevil*

Murdock’s superpowers in *Marvel’s Daredevil* do not radically alter diegetic space, since, unlike the 2003 film, they do not reveal much of its digital understructure, except for a few seconds worth of it. Alternately, then, the series develops more of a ratio correspondence of its main character’s costume to its editing strategies, *mise-en-scène* designs, and cinematographic maneuvers. Murdock dons the traditional Daredevil suit and uses the clubs for the first time in the final episode. After escaping from a police detail after the failure of the Union Allied scheme,⁹ the Kingpin confronts Daredevil, who arrives in costume to recapture the villain. At that moment, the tenor of the series’ action sequences subtly changes, as they come to stylistically resemble the superhero more so than the martial arts film. Daredevil, for instance, through a series of quick cuts, immediately dodges the machinegun fire of one of the Kingpin’s thugs, throwing one of the clubs, taking the man out with it, and then catching it as it rebounds off the side of a van. This ricochet shot, more firmly than any other time in the series, types the character’s superhuman abilities as endo-prosthetic. Moreover, Daredevil’s climactic fight with the Kingpin adds another twist to the series’ development of its title character’s somatotype. The Kingpin wrests the clubs—now in the configuration of a staff—from Daredevil, using them to thrash the superhero so ferociously that sparks scintillate from his costume. Nonetheless, Daredevil manages to retrieve the staff, collapse it into its two constituent clubs, and eventually defeat the criminal entrepreneur. These actions thus consolidate Daredevil’s status as an endo-prosthetic superhero, extending the clubs, as correlatives of our sense organs and neuroskeletal matrixes, into distant space only for them to eventually return to and reintegrate with the character. The costume also makes sense of its introductory credits sequence, throughout

which a reddish substance slowly clots into the form of Daredevil's costume, as well as into the statues, skyscrapers, and spires of the cathedral of Hell's Kitchen. The credits sequence suggests that, as Murdock transforms into Daredevil over the course of thirteen episodes, he will start to overcode the city, aligning it with the diegetic universe specific to that of the superhero film. The series demonstrates, then, in the words of the Kingpin, that "one man in a silly little costume can make a difference," that this man can redefine the (sub)generic tone of an entire series.

Season two of *Daredevil* (2016), under new showrunners Doug Petrie and Marco Ramirez, extends its title superhero's transformative story arc. Only this time, Murdoch risks over-identifying with the Daredevil character, sacrificing romantic and career opportunities in order to fight criminals, ninjas, and rival vigilantes in Hell's Kitchen. The first episode introduces the Punisher, the media's name for Frank Castle (Jon Bernthal), a former Special Forces operative who murders criminals in retaliation for the mafia shootout that took the lives of the man's wife and children. After Castle wipes out most of the Irish Mob, Daredevil confronts the vigilante on a rooftop. The two crimefighters engage in a martial arts fight, a relatively even match that ends after the Punisher shoots Daredevil in the temple at close range. The shot cracks the top of Daredevil's mask, forcing armorer Melvin Potter to crudely stitch it together, so that a scar runs down its surface, indicating an impairment to the superhero's "devil's horns," or rather their re-elaboration of our spinal-proprioceptive mechanisms into a set of radar-driven super-abilities. After this first episode, Daredevil seems to experience unusual difficulty in negotiating the season's other action set-pieces, enduring capture, injuries, and moral embarrassment throughout them.

Daredevil senses the Punisher on another rooftop about to use short-range rockets on an outlaw motorcycle club, and decides to intervene, this time using the clubs in the ensuing fight. The image digitally slows down at certain choice moments, accenting the characters' acrobatic fighting styles and more significantly tipping us off to Daredevil's use of radar sense in order to "feel out" the environment and dodge the Punisher's counterattacks. The two continue to fight as they sidestep continuous rifle shots from New York Police Department (NYPD) snipers; fortunately for Daredevil, though, it starts to rain at this moment, an allusion to the 2003 film that suggests that the vibrations of the droplets as they fall against the rooftop might improve his tactile-kinesthetic senses. However, Daredevil falls unconscious during the fight and awakens in chains as the Punisher's captive, which suggests that the superhero's re-elaboration of our spinal horns, as they condition our stability, equilibrium, and responsiveness to environmental changes, remains slightly dysfunctional after the events of the series' first episode. The crack in the mask, in short, according to Daredevil's metamorpho-physiological ratios, translates into a "crack" in his super-abilities. The scar runs down the center of the mask, corresponding to the medial situation of the spine; it also forks

towards its right eye, indexing the damage the Punisher inflicts on Daredevil's dorsal column, typically resulting in ataxia, the impairment of the vibratory sense, and other signs of neurobehavioral maladaptation. The Punisher ridicules the superhero, exploiting these cracks in Daredevil's armor: "You run around this city in a pair of little boy's pajamas and a mask. You go home at night, right? Take that mask off. Maybe you think it wasn't you who did those things, maybe it was somebody else." After escaping the chains, Daredevil fails to stop the Punisher from firing a rocket at the motorcycle club, inciting its members to attack them.

The superhero, after subduing the Punisher, fights these criminals while descending a staircase, a sequence that functions as a close analogue, although a more vertical one, to the warehouse fight scene in the show's first season. The criminals converge on Daredevil this time from every corner of the screen, as the superhero's facial direction, neck movement, and spatial repositioning, as well as the noises on the soundtrack, clue us into the next area of attack, much as if we too were experiencing a sort of radar sense. Once again, the series relies on our ears to make sense of its action, even though, in the slow motion fight against the Punisher, it relies on our eyes to move us to infer the functioning of Daredevil's super-senses during the scene. These action sequences *cross and confuse our sense modalities* as they represent the effects of Daredevil's superpowers on the show's diegetic spaces in different ways. These sequences, as they contrast each other, thus suggest that something remains slightly amiss with Daredevil, that his radar sense during the stairwell fight does not exert the same forceful influence on the show's visual regime as it does in the first episode. The character, in fact, struggles throughout the season in subsequent fight sequences against the Punisher, the returning Nobu, and the warriors of the Hand, an ancient ninja clan with ties to the Yakuza. Moreover, even though Daredevil rescues Castle from the Irish Mob and remands the vigilante into NYPD custody, their verbal exchange on the rooftop nonetheless manages to "crack" the superhero's self-concept, casting it into doubt. Much as with Castle, Matt Murdock starts to slip too far into the vigilante role, much to the detriment of the attorney's career, friendships, and romantic involvement with Karen Page. He spends more time on the streets as Daredevil than serving as Castle's defender in court, forcing "Foggy" Nelson to quit and work for another firm. Murdock's career, relationships, and sense of self, in short, come to seem *as damaged as the mask and as confused as his senses*.

The crisis or "crack" concerning Daredevil's self-image worsens from episode to episode. Murdock reunites with Stick midseason, and rekindles a romance with the assassin Elektra Natchios (Élodie Yung), investigating with them the identity of the Black Sky, the Hand's object of veneration. Murdock and Elektra crash one of the Yakuza's fundraisers in order to steal one of their files. Acting as if truly sightless, without any radar senses whatsoever, Murdock "accidentally" spills a drink on a representative of the Roxxon Oil

Company and steals the man's security clearances. Matt Murdock, the defense counselor with a sense-disability, thus functions as a covert identity for the character as much as does Daredevil. After all, the clumsiness and sensorimotor impairment that Murdock feigns in this scene seems as much a "put-on" as the superhero costume. Murdock and Elektra, with the success of their ruse, infiltrate the Yakuza's database centers, steal the file, and attempt to elude the watchmen as they make their escape. Murdock uses the radar sense in order to navigate their way out of the computer annex. *Daredevil* once more resorts to audio cues in order to clue us into the functioning of the title character's super-senses. The series does so earlier, as Daredevil and Elektra search the Yakuza's cargo train for signs of the children that the Hand abducts for some reason. The two of them do not rummage through the cars, as Daredevil's radar sense simply sounds them to determine whether they are empty. He shares this information with Elektra and the viewer, allowing us to "see" events through sense-organs other than our eyes. However, we must remember that, since the first episode, the character's superpowers remain erratic and sometimes unreliable in their functioning.

For example, Daredevil experiences difficulty in fighting Nobu, certain members of the Hand, and the children that they use in their strange rituals, since they do not register the same cardiac rhythms, respiratory rates, and internal noise as the rest of us. These villains, according to the surface narrative, appear zombies who underwent some sort of rite of resurrection under the Hand's mystical supervision. These ninjas make formidable opponents for Daredevil, whose radar sense cannot easily track or anticipate their movements. Towards a metamorpho-physiological reading of the series, though, these zombie villains draw our attention to the tactile-proprioceptive deficits that Daredevil sometimes suffers from ever since the Punisher shot him in the face. Daredevil cannot "feel" them in the show's diegetic environments as well as can the other characters, most of them familiar from season one. Daredevil, in the final episodes, therefore decides to again visit Melvin Potter, who redesigns the mask, making it more durable, and improves upon the endo-prosthetic clubs, making them reconfigurable as a staff, a set of nunchakus, or a rappelling claw, much as in the 2003 film. The superhero uses them to incapacitate one of the minders of the Roxxon agent, finding out soon after that Elektra is the Black Sky that the Hand seeks out. Daredevil fights several of the clan's members on another rooftop, this time without wearing a mask. The complete repair of the now scar-free costume, then, appears to coincide with the restoration of the character's super-senses, as well as *seamless* inhabitation of the Murdock-Daredevil identities. The superhero, despite incurring several injuries, trounces several ninjas mask-free, and thus, in the face of Castle's insults, cannot disclaim these violent actions as if "somebody else" were responsible for them. Nobu, though, at the same time murders Elektra, stabbing the martial artist through the abdomen. Daredevil, with some assistance from the Punisher, defeats the villain and the remaining ninjas, and then races

to Elektra's side as she dies. Nonetheless, the epilogue of the series shows the Hand carrying away Elektra's corpse in one of their ritual caskets, a suggestion that, for their own evil reasons, they aim to resurrect the assassin, who might conceivably return with superhuman abilities.

ELEKTRA

Elektra Natchios—the Grecian font of the title sequence indicating the character's ethnic roots—first returns from death in Rob Bowman's *Elektra* (2005) as an assassin and a former student of the mystic martial arts trainer Stick (Terence Stamp). The first action sequence in the film establishes Elektra's endo-prosthetic skills. Wearing a costume that consists of a scarlet corset with sashes trailing from it, she infiltrates the safe house of a criminal target. After dispatching the other criminals, Elektra murders the target, throwing a trademark sai (a Japanese dagger with two sharp side wings) through the man's chest and then immediately retrieving it. Afterwards, she accepts an assignment from an anonymous client, demanding that she wait for further instructions in a seaside cottage, where she cleans constantly and arranges foods in an orderly fashion, shows the signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Elektra makes the acquaintance of two neighbors, Mark (Goran Visnjic) and teenage daughter Abby (Kirsten Prout), whom she soon discovers are the targets of the assassination. She decides to save them from the Hand, in this film a ninja crime syndicate that then sends a team of supervillains to chase after the three of them, dispose of Elektra and Mark, and seize Abby, who over time starts to demonstrate the abilities of a martial arts savant. Throughout most of the narrative, Elektra wears normal clothes as she and the other two characters run from the five members of the Hand. However, in the film's climax, she returns to the corset, which, along with the shape of her weapons of choice, tips us off as to which of our anatomic functions her superpowers re-elaborate.

Unlike Daredevil, Elektra shows no compunction about committing murder; in any case, the film confers the status of antihero on her, as she explores the maternal feelings she starts to show towards Abby. Jennifer K. Stuller (2010) thus argues that Elektra's "redemption comes from saving the child and forgiving herself" (129). The film's maternal themes, though, do not merely soften an otherwise tough female action character or tether this woman's strength, self-assurance, and sense of independence to a traditional sex role. These themes more expressly relate to Elektra's super-abilities, or rather to their metamorpho-physiological adaptation of the structure and functions of the menstrual canals. The sais that Elektra carries, often at the waistline, resemble in shape the uterus seen from the frontal view, their side wings the objective correlatives of the fallopian tubes, which also fork out and curve forwards from the midline of the reproductive system. On its own, this reading might seem too much of a stretch, except for the fact that it also makes

some sense of Elektra's unconventional costume design, as she does not sport a mask or chevron. The corset, tights, and flowing sashes that she wears in the film's opening and final action set-pieces strike the viewer on first impression as manifestly *blood red*, and as such they motion towards the *trails of blood that she leaves* over the film's off-screen diegetic spaces. Moreover, Elektra only wears the costume in the film twice—after the opening sequence, she wears white when training with Stick—which suggests the regular appearance and return of the menstrual stage of the uterine cycle.

However, in its construction of Elektra's super-abilities, the film mobilizes certain negative cultural clichés concerning menstruation's effects on women. Stick, we soon discover, threw Elektra out from the training camp, the woman too full of rage to fit in with what the sensei calls "the way" there. According to such feminist critics as Lauren Rosewarne (2012) and Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth (1988), irritability, irrationality, and "bitchiness" are some of the qualities "commonly attributed to the menstruating woman," who might then evoke reactions of fear, disgust, or (self)-loathing (94, 95, 200). These cultural attitudes towards the emotional symptoms of menstruation might account for Elektra's compulsion to obsessively clean the rental cottage after the film's violent opening set-piece. Laura Kipnis (2006) speculates that the social disparagement of menses and other fluids as "filthy" or "unclean" affects women's existential sense of their own conditions of embodiment, so that, when straightening up or otherwise taking care of "the domicile," women at the same time offer "a commentary on themselves," making themselves appear clean, orderly, and mess-free (100). Elektra, in fact, exhibits such tendencies early in the film in the scenes set in the cottage, the interior of which she furiously scrubs and rearranges after the opening fight scene, throughout which she *spills the blood* of a number of enemies.

Most importantly, Elektra's superhuman senses, different in origin and reach than those of Matt Murdock, seem analogous to some of the functions of the uterine system. Stick uses the fictive mystical art of *kimagure* to revive Elektra from the death she suffers in *Daredevil*; in addition, the sensei uses this art to impart to her a certain form of clairvoyance, which Stick describes as "the ability to control time, the future, even life and death." The film visualizes these abilities in endo-prosthetic terms: as one of the Hand's ninja assassins descends on Mark and Abby, Elektra descries the future attack from afar, as though she were casting her sensorium into the distance and then retracting it, so that she might anticipate and counter the man's martial arts technique. As if to underscore the endo-prosthetic complexion of these super-abilities, Elektra throws a sai at the ninja, nails the man's "hand" to the wall (to mock the clan responsible for the attack), and then reclaims the weapon as she orders Mark and Abby to run. Unlike *Daredevil*, whose radar sense digitally renders the *mise-en-scène*, Elektra's "sixth sense" disturbs the narrative's chronological flow, inserting flash forwards into it that

momentarily disorient the viewer and convolute the film's temporal order. The superpowers of this character thus flesh out the following set of correspondences:

Menstrual Canals: Sais $\propto$ Clairvoyance: Flash Forwards

Furthermore, Elektra's clairvoyance changes the affectual drift of some of the quieter scenes in the film, making them seem much more suspenseful—"fertile," so to speak, with the capacity for action to emerge on the screen. Thus, despite Elektra's obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)-driven efforts to neatly rearrange the objects in the cottage, this faculty of clairvoyance, as well as the few flashbacks to scenes involving the character's mother, works to make somewhat of a mess out of the film's narrative order. *Elektra*, in other words, asks us not only to sit, watch, and enjoy its action scenes; it demands that we experience their onset, that we accustom ourselves to their rhythms.

What makes the film's enactment of Elektra's clairvoyant senses uterine, though, rather than ocular or proprioceptive, is that it evokes certain feminist spiritualist understandings of women's reproductive cycle. Some writers, rather than treating menstruation as taboo, dirty, or the cause of anger, shame, or emotional disturbance, reconceptualize ovulation, endometrial shedding, and pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms as sources of *power* for women. Emily Martin, for example, reports that some women seem to experience visions, special dreams, or moments of clarity at certain times of their monthly cycles; and, similarly, Chris Bobel (2012) reports that other women favor menstruation as a resource from which they can obtain "wisdom," "increased awareness," and "sensitivity" to their environment (128; 72). Elektra, of course, at certain moments in the film, shows forth all these remarkable attributes—clarity, sensitivity, awareness—the character's sensorium reaching outside the eyes, ears, and nervous system, responsive to imminent dangers in the diegetic environment that these organs cannot detect, since these dangers emerge in the future, in the next instant of the narrative. *Elektra* thus refigures the virtual capacities of (pre)menstrual affect and sense-experience as a superpower, with its title character compelling the film to flash forwards, whether to a ninja ambush or to the onrush of a massive fireball, so that she can save Mark and Abby while destroying the Hand's forces at the same time. As Stick says, Elektra, through the exercise of these superpowers, commands "the future, even life and death," terms that resonate with the reproductive functions of the ovarian system. The uterine system functions to discharge menstrual fluids, mucosal tissues, and the remains of mature ova that do not fuse with sperm, no matter the reason; in other words, this system controls the "life and death" of the egg, either implanting it into the womb or flushing it out of the vagina. Elektra's clairvoyance, then, does not update the dubious and stereotypical notion of women's intuition so much as it rearticulates the cross-modal functions and the side advantages of menstrual experience. She uses this sense, after all, to foresee and take charge of

situations that involve “matters of life and death,” saving others, eliminating threats, and ensuring that she take a decisive role in the outcomes of the narrative. As with the menstrual ducts, Elektra flushes out “the future” inside the film—she traces its form in a few mini-sequences that flash forward to unwelcome forces that she can feel out and then quickly expel from the narrative, enabling it to reset its chronological flow.

As a way to distinguish Elektra’s extrasensory abilities from Daredevil’s neuro-haptic ones, the film opposes its title character to the five units of the Hand, almost all of whom represent a different somatotype. The first and weakest, Kinkou (Edison T. Ribeiro), displays in the narrative no super-abilities or extraordinary skills. Mark and Abby, in fact, manage to defeat this man, whom we can consider a stand-in for the typical villain of the martial arts film. Kinkou thus seems the “little finger” of the Hand, its smallest, most useless member. However, one of the other five assassins, Stone (Bob Sapp), represents the ecto-prosthetic somatotype, in which a nonhuman substance or “second skin” forms over the alter ego of a character. The epidermis of this member of the Hand seems as invulnerable as stone to damage. Elektra therefore resorts to crushing the villain’s softer internals with a falling tree, a visual play on “sticks and stones.” One of the assassins, Tattoo (Chris Ackerman), seems closer to Elektra in metamorpho-physiological constitution than the other members of the Hand. Tattoo shares with Elektra an endo-prosthetic type of superpower: this villain can three-dimensionalize monstrous tattoos, move them into the film’s diegetic space, control them telepathically from a distance, and force them to turn into mere “skin” once again. Moreover, whereas most tattoos come about from injecting ink into the dermis, these more animate tattoos work in reverse, injecting Tattoo’s dermis into the film’s external spaces. Tattoo, in one scene, sends one of these mental-dermal constructs in the form of an eagle to spy on Elektra, a twist on her own aptitude for spying out the immediate future. The film, after all, also depicts Elektra’s clairvoyance as a mode of self-projection. She even recognizes Tattoo as a fellow endo-prosthetic superhuman; after she overcomes the snake-like constructs this villain sends into the film’s climactic scene, she says, tacitly admitting to the traits they share in common, “Nice trick...I’ve seen it before.” Thus Stone and Tattoo exaggerate via their superpowers the virtual capacities of the digits of the “Hand.” Stone, for instance, refigures the thumb’s epidermis, which, as it is slightly thicker than that of the other fingers, offers extra resistance to impacts, infections, avulsions, mechanical stress, and chemical damage. Tattoo, in contrast, refigures the functions of the elastic fibers of our middle finger—the most extensible and arguably the most (crassly) symbolic of our digits—that overall condition the “Hand’s” muscle strength, flexion, and sense of touch. The chimeras that Tattoo extends outwards into the *mise-en-scène* demonstrate these same faculties, feeling it out, acting on it, and coloring over it in ways that vex Elektra and the film’s other characters.

The next member of the Hand that Elektra defeats, the master assassin Kirigi (Will Yun Lee), moves at superhuman speeds—as quick as a flash of his trademark swords. The two of them fight at the former Natchios family mansion, now in a state of dilapidation, where Kirigi seems able to manipulate the film’s visual fields and digital effects, raising the white sheets covering the furniture and suspending them in midair. Elektra, whom the target in the opening scene refers to as a “ghost,” now must stab at the white sheets fluttering throughout the stateroom, any one of which might conceal the villain. The film thus defines the nebulous scope of Kirigi’s superpowers as epi-prosthetic, dependent in some way on their connection to some object in the *mise-en-scène*: for example, in this sequence the sheets double for Kirigi’s white martial arts uniform. He suddenly emerges from one of them, disarming, subduing, and threatening to cut Elektra’s throat, a feat impossible were it not for the connection of the sheets in the room to the villain’s superpowers and costume. If Elektra or someone else were to fatally injure Kirigi, though, we might then expect the sheets to fall and remain inanimate; conversely, if she were to cut through all the sheets, she might then render some of Kirigi’s abilities useless, as well as expose the villain to attack.

These sorts of epi-prosthetic tricks derive from the villain’s re-elaboration of another one of our digits, specifically the index finger, as well as the skin of its dorsum, which is thinner, suppler, and more venous than the rest of the “Hand.” The dorsum, made up of areolar tissue, an interlacing type of connective tissue that scatters in random directions, also embeds our fingernails in their cuticles. The fight set-piece in the mansion recodes some of these qualities of our index fingers in the way Kirigi appears in it, moves about it, and affects its *mise-en-scène*. He first of all seems the thinnest, fastest, and most flexible and acrobatic of the assassins; moreover, dark reddish stitch-work runs vein-like across the front of Kirigi’s white shirt. He stands on a mezzanine carrying two swords, each of which re-elaborates the sharpness of the tips of our “pointer fingers.” Most interestingly, though, Kirigi, much as with areolar tissue, appears to move at random, whether striking directly at super-speeds or using the interlacing folds of the sheets afloat in the room as camouflage. Elektra, in a rematch outside the mansion, thus throws Kirigi down a well in order to neutralize these sorts of movement. At the outset of the fight, the ninja floats, uniform fluttering, through the air in the manner of the white sheets in the earlier scene, appearing fast enough to dodge one of Elektra’s sais. However, in true endo-prosthetic fashion, she soon recovers it, thrusts it into Kirigi’s midsection, and uses it to slam the villain down the well.

Over the course of this fight scene, though, she experiences another clairvoyant vision, this time of Typhoid (Natassia Malthe), the final assassin, about to murder Abby in the middle of an outdoor maze, another tribute in the film to its title character’s Greek origins. Typhoid spreads disease into the organic matter that she touches, causing it to decay, darken, and eventually



Fig. 2.7 Typhoid's exfoliation of the *mise-en-scène* in *Elektra*

disintegrate into flakes. These super-abilities seem the exo-prosthetic opposite to those of Elektra, exuding toxins into the diegetic environment that never recombine with the rest of this villain's flesh. Earlier, Typhoid surprises Elektra with a "kiss of death" that drains the vitality of the character and the nearby foliage in the area, which scatters in a ring close to the two of them (see Fig. 2.7). This image suggests Typhoid's debasement of the romantic connotations of our ring finger, which, according to superstition, contains a vein that connects it to the heart. This scene, as it associates same-sex desire with a corruptive influence, deserves condemnation for its tendential, if not outright, homophobia. Another way to make sense of it, though, might come from a consideration of this specific villain's re-elaboration of one of the main structural-histological mechanisms of the "Hand." Typhoid, in atrophying the flesh of other characters, recodes as a superpower the desquamation of the skin, most noticeably on our fingertips and other extremities. Thus, as Typhoid ravages others' skin tone, density, and consistency, she stresses the more abject status of such emissions as scurf or menses; in contrast, Elektra's superpowers challenge or disavow this status, exploring the new sensitivities that the monthly cycle might visit on some women. Thus Elektra ends the film's climactic fight sequence with a final endo-prosthetic flourish, throwing a sai at Typhoid and retrieving it as it sticks out from the earth. These images subtly differentiate Elektra from the villain: more specifically, Typhoid causes certain elements of the diegesis to rot, warp, wither, shrivel, and waste away upon contact with them, whereas Elektra works to *recirculate* them throughout the film. She recycles outfits, for instance, returning to the famous "blood red" one for the film's final sequences; further, as she periodically experiences clairvoyant visions, she determines the flow that the action in these sequences takes.

Manohla Dargis (2005), in a *New York Times* review of *Elektra*, notes that the superhero "dons fetish-wear the color of blood." Also, Mike Madrid

(2009) says about the comics versions of the characters, “Dressed in matching blood red, Elektra and Daredevil find themselves on opposite sides of the law, but still hopelessly drawn to each other” (226). However, unlike the 2003 *Daredevil*, *Elektra* undoubtedly sexualizes the metamorpho-physiological abilities of its main character. The film not only costumes Elektra in dark crimson twice, in the opening and climactic scenes, as though to mark the cyclical nature of her superheroics. The film in addition folds these scenes into an overarching story arc concerning Elektra’s ambivalence to mother-daughter relationships. As Stuller (2010) and Lisa Purse (2011) separately argue, *Elektra* develops its title character from a ruthless assassin into a morally responsible “mother figure” (128; 85). These writers, though, fail to comment on the denouement, in which Elektra says farewell to Mark and Abby, as she refuses to step inside the roles of wife, mother, or domestic for them. Of course, the return of “red” in the final fight scene foreshadows this ending to the film, in that it suggests the resetting of the ovarian clock more so than it does Elektra’s transformation into a (step)mother for Abby and restorer of the nuclear family structure. The film, over and against its own themes, takes a stronger interest in tapping into, exploring, and embellishing the special affective-perceptual features of women’s (pre)menstrual experience. Although it may seem to reduce its female superhero to a sexist emphasis on maternal sentiments and reproductive organs, the film also warrants attention for thinking through women’s anatomic specificities in ways that refuse to construe them as shameful, inferior, emotionally compromising, or simply there for reasons of childbearing. *Elektra*, supposedly a spinoff of *Daredevil*, therefore refuses to reproduce the content, style, or exact somatotype characteristics of that first film, as it rather seeks to reconceive of the menstrual cycle as a continuous and often unpredictable source of new “virtual powers”¹⁰—and it is its own film for doing so.

THOR

The narrative of Kenneth Branagh’s *Thor* (2011) occurs on multiple worlds. The film opens with astrophysicist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), fellow scientist Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgård), and snarky intern sidekick Darcy Lewis (Kat Dennings) investigating a freak “atmospheric disturbance,” actually a wormhole through which Thor (Chris Hemsworth), the warrior-prince of Asgard, the realm of the Norse deities, crashes to the earth. Thor’s father Odin (Anthony Hopkins), ruler of the Asgardians, strips the armor, title, and magic war-hammer Mjölnir from the future superhero, who faces an indefinite exile as a mere mortal on Earth for rashly invading the realm of the Frost Giants with Sif (Jaimie Alexander), the Warriors Three (Tadanobu Asano, Joshua Dallas, and Ray Stevenson), and the trickster figure Loki (Tom Hiddleston). Loki, as Odin’s adoptive son, orchestrates Thor’s exile to usurp the throne during the “Odinsleep,” the time during which the ruler regenerates.

As interim ruler, Loki orders Heimdall (Idris Elba), the sentry of the Bifröst, to seal off this “rainbow bridge” to the other worlds so that Thor can never return to Asgard. According to *The Guardian* (2010), the casting of the African-American Elba, not to mention the Japanese Asano, as Norse deities was controversial among certain white supremacist fans, specifically those who saw the move as an example of “social engineering.” However, these voices completely miss the fact that the casting of *Thor* thoroughly conforms to Branagh’s auteur sensibilities as a director. He frequently casts nonwhite actors, among them Denzel Washington, Adrian Lester, and David Oyelowo, in such Shakespearean adaptations as *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2000), and *As You Like It* (2006). However, the casting of *Thor* more than abrades racist traditions in Western mythologies and Hollywood filmmaking; it also speaks to the film’s release context, as the movement from the Earth to Thor’s origins in Asgard corresponds to a transition from a material set to completely digital ones. These other realms resemble in design the digital environments in such online multiplayer diversions as *World of Warcraft*, in which users can select the dress, attributes, and “skins” of their avatars from a wide range of options.

The rest of the film effectively charts the encroachment of the digital aesthetic of the other realms onto the more naturalistic one on Earth. The cinematography, for example, acts more in the manner of a virtual camera than a traditional one, as it circles, spirals, cants, and ramps the frame rate of the action in certain scenes, recalling the constant scrolling, refreshing, deleting, updating, enlarging, and reformatting of data modules on a computer screen. Moreover, in the fight scenes involving the Frost Giants, the film constructs a “digital multitude” reminiscent of those in online multiplayer forums; the term, as Kristen Whissel (2014) theorizes it, refers to the “massive computer-generated armies, swarms, armadas, and hordes” that emerge in certain diegetic contexts, moving swiftly onscreen despite their inestimable numbers to “enact the notion of an impending apocalypse that threatens to overturn an era almost without warning” (60, 67). *Thor* mostly confines its digital multitudes to scenes set in those realms that resemble in their digital design such fantasy adventure massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORGs) as *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft*, or *Final Fantasy*. Nonetheless, an apocalyptic force arrives on Earth in the film: “without warning,” Loki sends the Destroyer, a magical weapon, a digital construct, and a suit of armor that moves without a wearer inside it, to assassinate Thor and totally devastate the small New Mexico town he resides in. The Destroyer represents *sheer topological deformation*, the type mostly familiar to us from CG displays; when Sif and the Warriors Three, who travel to Earth to save Thor, try to impale it, the digital creature simply warps, twists, and reconnects the rings of its armor to recover its mobility and rejoin the fight. The Destroyer, though, much as with Thor, Sif, and the Warriors Three, travels to the Earth via the “rainbow bridge,” which closely resembles a transparent fiber optic cable,



Fig. 2.8 The “fiber optic” Bifröst bridge in *Thor*

full of multicolor wires and circuitries (see Fig. 2.8). The Bifröst, as an information relay enabling the Earth to connect to Asgard and the other Nine Realms, thus functions as the first of three major *interfaces* in the film. The racist commentators on *Thor* never mention the close association of Heimdall with this obvious data nexus or interdimensional connector, which of course speaks to the relevance of the film’s casting to the digital age.

However, our skin is not the major organ that *Thor* metamorpho-physiologically re-elaborates into its main character’s set of superpowers. The weapon Mjölnir steadies Thor while in flight, summons storm activities, and focuses the superhero’s displays of superhuman strength, reflexes, and endurance. He flips the war-hammer in the air at the coronation rite—which Odin soon revokes due to Thor’s “arrogance and stupidity” in unilaterally attacking the Frost Giants—a tip-off as to the true nature of the character’s somatotype. Thor, while accusing the Frost Giants of trying to steal the Casket, a relic that can reproduce the winters of their realm, extends Mjölnir, throws it at these digital creatures, and watches as it returns on its own in slow motion. The camera even follows Mjölnir after Thor throws it again, tracking the way it arcs through the air and smashes through the flesh of the Giants, a trick taken from one of the fight sequences in *Blade II*, during which the camera similarly follows a silver shuriken as it cuts through several vampires. After the war-hammer returns, Thor twirls it, an act that calls an electric storm down on the Giants, destroying many of them. He then twirls it once more, using it to steer a course through the air and right through the mouth of the immense monster threatening to swallow the other Asgardian warriors. His superbody acts as Mjölnir does earlier in the scene, as a missile that decimates enemies only to return to where it once was—for Thor, the earth; for Mjölnir, Thor’s clutches. The war-hammer thus functions as the next *interface* in the film, an endo-prosthetic satellite of Thor’s flesh that mediates the character’s contact with enemies onscreen. Odin, earlier in the narrative, claims

that Mjölnir can serve as “a weapon to destroy, or as a tool to build,” words that can equally well describe digital effects software that can create objects, characters, and even environmental disturbances, such as freak storms, for a film, as well as erase them from it effortlessly. Mjölnir, in short, allows Thor to interface with the diegesis, removing its digital villains, rendering onto it strange new weather events, and shuttling from one of its informational “realms” to another. Thor, during the exile on Earth, thus tells Jane, while tracing a finger over an astrological map, “Your ancestors called it magic and you call it science. Well, I come from a place where they’re one and the same thing.” This moment in the film, taken from an over-the-shoulder camera angle, suggests Thor’s ability to *draw new worlds* on the screen, much as does a CG artist or an MMORG user sitting at a computer. Richard Reynolds (1992) argues that superhero stories “use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder” (16). Mjölnir serves as the token of the film’s digital effects, the interface that enables Thor to communicate with its diegetic environments, to refashion the elements in them, and to create the spectacular events that appear in them as if through magic,¹¹ since we cannot access or divine the alphanumeric codes that really execute them.

However, *Thor* takes a strange turn for a superhero film. The narrative spends more than thirty minutes on the mortal Thor trying to reclaim Mjölnir from the crater that entrenches it and the spy agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. who watch over it. This section of the film emphasizes Thor’s ordinariness under the conditions of exile. He succumbs to Darcy’s Taser and slumps to the floor after doctors inject a tranquilizer into his veins. He appears unable to raise Mjölnir out of the earth, as though it was Excalibur and Thor and the rest of the townsmen were unworthy of doing so. The film’s midsection is of interest, though, not only in that it depowers Thor, taking the superhero out of the superhero film. Odin’s curse appears to work in a more unique way, abruptly shifting the character’s somatotype from endo-prosthetic to epi-prosthetic. Mjölnir, in other words, seems to activate Thor’s superpowers, as much as contact with Thor activates the war-hammer’s magical qualities. Otherwise, it remains inert, while Thor remains as weak and vulnerable as the townfolk. Tellingly, though, Odin does not restore Thor’s armor, strength, or superhuman fortitude once the character reconnects with Mjölnir. He restores them when Thor exhibits capacities for self-sacrifice, emotional reserve, and compassion. The superhero’s short-term disempowerment thus does not result from a disconnection with some other object or aspect of the *mise-en-scène*, a sign of the epi-prosthetic somatotype; it results from Odin’s magic, from the interdiction against Thor expressing any superhuman attributes while in exile. Once Thor’s superpowers return, Mjölnir flies from the crater in endo-prosthetic fashion to return to its true owner. Thor throws it at the Destroyer, whom it incapacitates as it ricochets across the screen, suggesting that only through the “interface” that it represents can the Asgardians defeat an opponent of solely digital animation. Once the war-hammer

returns, Thor uses it to create another storm effect that erases the Destroyer from the screen. He then returns to Asgard to confront Loki, who wants to use the Bifröst to destroy the realm of the Frost Giants and achieve the status of Odin's favorite son. At first, Thor restrains Loki, resting the unliftable Mjölfnir on the villain's chest. After Loki explains this scheme, though, the war-hammer returns to Thor, who uses to smash the Bifröst and sever Asgard's connection to the other realms. He destroys the fiber optic cable, in short, that allows him to communicate with Jane, who resides in the material, naturalistic settings of Earth, not in fantastic realms straight from some MMORG.

As the subsequent installments of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, such as *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012) and *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor 2013) make clear, Thor does not derive his superpowers from Mjölfnir—without it, he retains superhuman strength, endurance, and fighting skills. The war-hammer channels these super-abilities, extending the reach of Thor's forcefulness into remote areas of diegetic space, sometimes even into other worlds. Mjölfnir thus appears an endo-prosthetic re-elaboration of Thor's fist, as it flies into enemies or obstacles, smacking into them as if they were still in striking distance of its superhumanly strong user. More specifically, since Thor's fists seem detachable in the form of an objective correlative, we might argue that Mjölfnir refigures their structure, as well as calls our attention to that of our wrists, the intersection at which our forearms meet the muscles, ligaments, and metacarpal bones of our hands. The weapon, in a way, acts in the manner of the wrist, channeling into distant areas the force and motion of Thor's arms, at the same time as it expresses the tactile impact of his fists. Mjölfnir can even overcode the rest of its owner's superbody, in effect turning it into a "flying fist," as when Thor smashes into the mouth of one of the Frost Giants' monsters. Furthermore, Thor uses Mjölfnir as a source of support in designing and compositing certain digital elements into the film, such as thunder strikes, storm clouds, and cyclonic winds. Why? Thor's reliance on the war-hammer for such acts of digital creation suggests the final *interface* the film thematizes: our wrists themselves, as they allow our arms to coordinate or "interface" with our fingers, tendons, and midpalmar muscles to accomplish certain tasks or motions. Therefore, much as CG technicians' wrists enable them to clasp a mouse or trace their fingertips over a touchscreen, Mjölfnir enables Thor to "draw" magical effects onto the otherwise realistic *mise-en-scène* of the film's New Mexico sets. *Thor* thus sets forth this formula as it fleshes out the somatotype of its central character:

Wrists, Forearms, and Fists: Mjölfnir $\propto$ Superhuman Strength: Storm Effects

This formula also traces the correspondences of the three interfaces in the film. Our wrists connect our forearms to our fists, much as Mjölfnir allows Thor to connect or interface with distant enemies. The "rainbow bridge" connects the Earth to other realms of existence, much as computer cables

and circuits allow us to interface with wholly digital environments, whether those in Asgard or *World of Warcraft*. The film thus relates, in terms of their mediatic functions, the most corporeal of interfaces to the most imaginary, machinic, or simulacral of them.

The equivocal notion of “interface” in the film also speaks to Graham Harman’s (2010) wide-ranging definition of an object as “anything with some sort of unitary reality,” whether an atom, a tree, an animal, a song, a cartoon character, a digital device, a myoskeletal structure, or a war-hammer (147–148). Since Thor constantly clutches at Mjölñir, the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe that feature him evoke the Heideggerian concept of *Zuhandenheit*, the object’s “readiness-to-hand” that allows someone to use it without necessarily theorizing about it. Harman, though, unlike Heidegger, argues that such use already implies a rudimentary unveiling or theorization of its qualities, even as the object withdraws its self-presence or ontological specificities from us. Harman thus argues, “The tool-being of the hammer is not a technical or linguistic practice, but a capital X that forever recedes from all contact with human meaningfulness” (45, 46). Moreover, the object withdraws its “X” from the other objects that come into contact with it in a “silent drama of force-against-force” that cannot exhaust its meanings, relational energies, or essential qualities (53). The fantasy, though, cutting across the *Thor* series—as well as most other superhero films—involves the *consubstantial nature* that Thor and Mjölñir share. The notion that the superpowers that these films associate with this weapon re-elaborate the intricacies, functions, or virtual capacities of our appendages suggests that, through these fantasies, we can “feel out” the more occult qualities of an object, or make sense of the ways that other objects might encounter it. Ian Bogost (2012) thus argues that entities must caricature one another, if they are to capture “some aspects of something else at the cost of other aspects” (66).

One of the major action scenes from Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* invites us to fathom, through our experience of our radiocarpal functioning, “what it might be like to be a hammer.” Thor and Iron Man fight over whether to turn Loki over to the Asgardian authorities. Mjölñir returns to Thor three times in the scene, underlining its endo-prosthetic extension and refiguration of the superhero’s fists: once after Thor throws it at Iron Man’s chestplate; another time after Iron Man retaliates, forcing the weapon from Thor’s clutches; and a final time after the two of them dive to the earth after tumbling in the air, Mjölñir separating from Thor during the free fall. Thor then tries to dent the indestructible shield of Captain America, who intervenes to stop the fight. Upon contact, the two objects release enough sparks, electric streaks, and shockwaves to mow down much of the forest that the fight occurs in, without either of them suffering any damage whatsoever. These two objects, even as they withdraw their full “tool-beings,” nonetheless touch off each other’s virtual capacities—most obviously, that their collision can flatten the *mise-en-scène*—that neither of them can effect nor materialize

on their own. Of course, these capacities also come about from the assemblages these objects form with the wrists, forearms, and metacarpal arches of the superheroes that clasp them. Thus the essential qualities of such aspects of our corpora, the scene might suggest, seem as elusive to us and to one another as these superheroes' weapons do to each other. Through the unpredictable result of their touching, of their mutual caricature of each other and of certain aspects of our flesh, *The Avengers* reminds us that *even our hands are "ready-to-hand,"* in a sense.

Later in the film, Thor tries to stop the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) from running amok on the deck of the Helicarrier, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s flying dreadnought, in another action sequence that clues us into the correspondence of Mjöltnir to its owner's fists. At first without the war-hammer, Thor strikes at the Hulk, even catching the monster's arm in the course of their fight and restraining it in a show of tremendous strength. This moment in the film definitively constitutes the superhero's somatotype as endo-prosthetic, with Mjöltnir an extension, rather than a source or cofactor, of Thor's superbody. Unable to win the fight, Thor summons Mjöltnir and uppercuts the Hulk with it; then the monster, thinking to use it against Thor, tries to lift it from the floor and fails due to its magical failsafes. The war-hammer thus acts in the exact same manner as Thor's fists earlier in the scene, as it too first strikes the Hulk and then immobilizes the monster's arm for a short time. The scene figures Mjöltnir as a clear extension of the impact, forcefulness, and range of motion of our fists, forearms, and wrists, enabling Thor to connect with areas of diegetic space that other characters cannot, thus disadvantaging them in a fight scenario. This recorporealization of *Zuhandenheit*—rather, this re-emphasizing of the "hand" in the tool's "readiness-to-hand"—continues in *Thor: The Dark World*, the sequel to the first two films with this character in them.

The first action sequence in this film features Thor, alongside Sif and the Warriors Three, fighting against ogre-like insurgents in one of the realms. Mjöltnir actually appears onscreen first, felling a chieftain, slowing in midair, and flying once again to its owner. Thor then shows forth a new superpower with it, cracking Mjöltnir against the earth and sending thunderclaps into a score of the ogres in the combat zone. The film thus adds an exo-prosthetic element to Thor's set of super-abilities, since these electric waves never return to their source. The constitution of a character's somatotype, though, we must remember, remains a matter of *proportion more than precision*. After all, Thor does not touch the earth directly; significantly, he strikes it with Mjöltnir, or rather with an endo-prosthetic extension of his fists that in this case serves to "one shot" the insurgents altogether. The effect is the same for the ending of this action sequence: a monster made of rock approaches the smaller Thor, who shatters it with one swing of the war-hammer in a reenactment of the episode of David and Goliath in the Hebrew Scriptures. These scenes from *The Avengers* and the *Thor* sequel demonstrate that Mjöltnir concentrates, supplements, and extends into diegetic space the motor functions,

manual-kinetic force, and skeletomuscular dynamics of some of Thor's major appendages.

Thor: The Dark World, as with the first film, couches these dynamics in "interface" terms, as its opens with a recapitulation of the Asgardians' ancient war with the Dark Elves, who want to turn our universe, in Odin's words, into "one of eternal night." Their ruler Malekith (Christopher Eccleston) seeks to reclaim the Aether, a cosmic weapon that consists of red digital corpuscles swirling about the film's *mise-en-scènes*, to use against the Asgardians and the rest of the Nine Realms. Odin's ancestors seize the Aether so as to "bury it deep," until an event that Heimdall calls the "Convergence," a rare alignment of the Nine Realms, threatens to unleash it. Jane Foster stumbles across a small wormhole in an industrial district of London, vanishing into another dimension where the Aether finds its way into the scientist's circulatory system—during a medical examination in Asgard, at Thor's insistence, we see its energies swim through the veins of Jane's arm. *The Dark World* thus confronts the repressive nature of most twenty-first century superhero films. They usually earn a PG-13 rating, since they refuse to depict one of the staple conventions of action films from the 1980s and 1990s: the spilling of blood in full view. The superhero film replaces this convention with action spectacles that contain colorful digital effects, sets, and characters who can suffer injuries without it seeming that violent, since their superbodies appear cartoonish or fantastically nonhuman to our eyes. Malekith wants to darken the content of the superhero film—to reintroduce some *blood* into it—so as to make it closer in tone to the action spectacles of earlier times. The Aether, though, remains a CG construction, reminding us that digital "blood" mostly now replaces the squibs in earlier action special effects shots. Odin thus describes it as "fluid and ever-changing," which might as easily refer to manipulable subpixels as to the fluids in our arteries, veins, and capillaries. Thor must therefore engage Malekith and the remaining Dark Elves in a war over the very digital design of the film, as well as the metamorpho-physiological complexion of its diegetic worlds. This war, as we might summarize it, then, opposes the coherence of the digital image to the fluidity of the values that render and constitute it, which the film maps onto another contradistinction: of the solidness of Thor's arms, fists, and war-hammer over and against the corpuscular flows that the film associates more with Malekith.

The villain's scheme to darken the tone of the film moreover requires the syzygial "Convergence" of the Nine Realms to take effect. This term speaks to the ideal of digital convergence, meaning the transmission or networking of information across different, although cross-compatible, media formats. Philip Rosen (2001) describes this ideal in terms of "universal reach," noting that it "assumes certain supporting and subsidiary technologies," such as fiber optic cables, telecommunication satellites, wireless servers, and content-addressable storage units (329). The time of the interdimensional Convergence in the film thus necessarily coincides with the restoration of

the Bifröst, the “rainbow bridge” that in its internal wiring resembles the fiber optic cables that enable digital technologies to communicate with one another. This cable-bridge represents the “universal reach” that Malekith requires to ensanguine the digital designs of the film’s diegesis, as well as those of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the narrative content of which spans film, television, and at-home media. The Convergence also opens up several mini-wormholes throughout the multiple realms in *The Dark World*. These wormholes act as random access-points, allowing the visuals of one scene to instantly transfer to another, almost in the way that one medium streams or downloads content onto another. For example, when Jane, Darcy, and their intern come across a wormhole in London, they test it out, dropping such objects as shoes, soda cans, and car keys into it, and watch as these items vanish from the screen. Jane then disappears into it for a short time, transferring as though she were a data file to another dimension. Earlier, she uses a global positioning system (GPS) tracker to meet Darcy at the industrial site; this device, as it receives satellite updates, or rather converges and communicates with another medium, acts much as does the wormhole, recoding and transforming the film’s material realities into digital readouts. As the Dark Elves invade Asgard, assassinating Thor’s mother while they search for the Aether, Jane sees the diegesis turn a dark reddish shade—in other words, despite all the violence on the screen, she remains the only character *to see blood*, which a PG-13 film cannot show. Thor, during this sequence, steps into action only after summoning Mjölnir, the weapon that, extending the reach of the character’s fists, serves to interface with the film’s digital *mise-en-scène* compositions. Furious over the assassination, Thor throws Mjölnir at the retreating Malekith’s starship, only for it to return without striking its target. He resolves to free Loki from Odin’s dungeons, chase after the Dark Elves, and reassert control over the film’s digital elements.

The climax sets forth these characters’ impossible visions for the content design of the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe, as well as offers the clearest exposition of the endo-prosthetic somatotype of any superhero film so far ever made. Thor, Loki, and the others venture into Svartalfheim, the desolate realm of the Dark Elves, where Malekith succeeds in extracting the Aether from Jane, absorbing it extrabodily in a sort of *blood transfusion*. The Dark Elves make their way to Earth in order to release the Aether at the center of the Convergence, darkening first the streets of London and then the other realms. The reddish clots of the Aether encircle Malekith, the epicenter of the digital tonal changes that the weapon imposes on the diegesis. Thor travels to Earth through a wormhole and through Mjölnir unleashes a thunderbolt on the villain, a radiant CG effect that opposes the PG-13 violence of the superhero film—wherein the characters do not inflict too much serious trauma on one another—to the actual “bloodbath” that surrounds Malekith and usually warrants an R rating in action cinema. As they fight, the two of them slip into and out of different worlds through wormholes, most often

shuttling from Earth to Svartalfheim, a study in contrasts from the vibrant to the dismal, from the naturalistic to the conspicuously over-digital, from “PG-13” worlds with non-graphic acts of violence in them to “R” ones that feature more intense and consistent forms of it.

Thor tries to neutralize the Aether and restore the realms to their usual color arrays, throwing Mjölnir at Malekith in the course of their fight. However, the two vanish through a wormhole into another dimension, so that the war-hammer cannot return to Thor as reliably as it usually does. Once Thor and Malekith reappear in London, Mjölnir rotates its direction and speeds once more to Earth; when the two vanish again to Svartalfheim, the war-hammer reverses course as well. Tellingly, Thor *cannot gain the upper hand* against Malekith without Mjölnir, the extension and refiguration of this superhero’s fists. Thor, once more on Earth, nonetheless manages to sever Malekith’s forearm. Jane and Erik Selvig use their makeshift teleportation devices to transport Malekith’s arm to Svartalfheim, a more appropriate site for such a macabre digital artifact than the film’s usual PG-13 environments, which Thor fights to reestablish. He moves to deliver a final shot to Malekith, right as, after a series of cross cuts, Mjölnir returns from space, endo-prosthetically accenting the shape and channeling the strength of its owner’s fists. Also, much as the wrist connects our fists to our forearms, the war-hammer too serves as a sort of interface, allowing Thor to re-access the film’s digital register—the Aether flows across and reddens the entire scene—and in effect rewrite it, erasing the CG corpuscles and other alien elements from the screen (see Fig. 2.9). Thor, with Jane and Erik’s assistance, finally transports the Dark Elves to their own realm, where their starship falls down atop Malekith,



Fig. 2.9 Mjölnir endo-prosthetically returns to its owner in *Thor: The Dark World*

who thus appears to die a violent death, *the bloodiness of which* the film, in the spirit of a typical PG-13 Marvel-Disney release, refuses to show us.

Loki, unbeknownst to Thor, survives the conflict with the Dark Elves, unseating Odin from the Asgardian throne off-screen and impersonating the regent. Throughout the *Thor* and *Avengers* series, Loki shows forth the ability to cast these sorts of illusions, as well as magically influence the minds of others, such as Erik Selvig and Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner). For example, Loki uses these superpowers to mimic the appearance of others,¹² displace images in diegetic space to fool them, and create the illusion of multiple “Lokis” to confuse them. These abilities, then, appear truly epi-prosthetic, unlike Thor’s, in that incapacitating Loki will cause these illusions to vanish, while disrupting them in some way will cost the trickster a degree of control over them. These magic abilities thus represent a metamorpho-physiological re-elaboration of the structure, functions, and embryogenetic roots of the *gallbladder*, the reservoir of bile instrumental to our digestion. This organ outpouches from the intestinal tube underneath our stomachs, the duodenum, to which it remains in contact, releasing its contents into it when we ingest fats in a sort of epi-prosthetic reciprocal connection. Additionally, some Western cultures associate “bile” with sourness and resentment, apt descriptors of Loki’s acrimonious relationship to Thor, Odin, and the Asgardians. Finally, Loki’s costume, dark green in tone, with two ram’s horns curling outwards from its skull-piece, shares the same color as the fluids in this organ and also resembles in form the two ducts that emanate from its neck.

This costume design, though, also tips us off to the animal qualities of Loki’s superpowers, the ways they allow us to think the faculties of our conscious minds, including our capacities to imitate, manipulate, and deceive, in relation to forces we usually consider nonhuman, non-cognitive, or non-subjective. Brian Massumi (2014) calls attention to the fact that animals can stylize their actions, turning them into “ludic gestures” that they can distinguish from their analogues in the “arena of combat”—in short, when animals nip rather than snap, they appear capable of signaling to others that “this is a game” (4–6). Massumi concludes that the “prehuman, preverbal logic of animal play is already essentially language-like” and thus creative (8). Massumi argues that, through their stylistic excesses, animals tap into something extra in their repertoires of combat skills, adaptive defenses, and instinctual reflexes, into a “power of variation” that enables them to deform their actions so as to improvise new responses to their external milieus (12, 19). Loki uses magical abilities to similarly “play” with others, so that they often cannot tell whether Loki teases them or rather acts with deadly malice towards them. Loki, for example, appears to stab Thor in front of the Dark Elves, an illusion the trickster casts so that the two of them can move in close enough to destroy the Aether. However, some “snap” remains to this “nip,” as Loki in the film’s epilogue “stabs the Asgardians in the back,” relying on another illusion to steal the throne from Thor, Odin’s rightful successor. Loki and Thor

thus seem thorough opposites in these films: one the congenital son of Odin, the other adoptive; one reliant on raw strength, the other on subtle meta-action; one drawing on the traits of our external organs, the other our internal organs. These characters, though, converge on one matter, in that they enable us to think afresh the capabilities of certain aspects of our conditions of embodiment, to visualize the “virtual powers” or the “power of variation” (whatever term we favor) of our corpora as they relate to different objects, whether machinic, animal, or digital-abstract, touching them, metaphorizing them, and forming new assemblages with them.

CAPTAIN AMERICA

Elmer Clifton and John English’s 1944 Republic serial *Captain America* (1944) features the first theatrical appearance of this superhero, a character for Timely Comics, the forerunner to Marvel Comics, who fought against the Nazis on the warfront¹³ (50–51). The serial, although the first adaptation of a Marvel creation, nonetheless makes significant changes to the Captain America mythos. The serial makes Captain America a vigilante, not a soldier; identifies the character as Grant Gardner, district attorney, rather than Steve Rogers, frail draft reject; and makes no mention of the Super Solider experiment or sidekick Bucky Barnes. More importantly, this version of the character might share the costume and motorcycle of the original, although not the same superbody or trademark weapon. The serial sees Captain America (Dick Purcell) thwart the schemes of Nazi agent and museum curator Cyrus Maldor (Lionel Atwill), who masquerades as the Scarab, to acquire such weapons of mass destruction as the Dynamic Vibrator, the Electronic Firebolt, and the Purple Death, which can turn its victims into zombies. The serial thus relegates its fantastic elements to its narrative contrivances, rather than its main characters’ extraordinary states of embodiment. The action sequences resemble those in other vigilante serials of the World War II era, such as William Witney’s *Spy Smasher* (1942) and Spencer Gordon Bennett’s *The Masked Marvel* (1943), in which the title characters, even as they fight multiple men at once, take a number of shots to their faces and even sometimes fall unconscious to set up cliffhangers for certain episodes. The 1944 *Captain America*, in short, takes the “super” out of the superhero film.¹⁴ After two television films (Rob Holcomb 1979; Ivan Nagy 1979) and a direct-to-video effort (Albert Pyun 1990), Captain America made cameo appearances only in a few children’s television cartoons until the release of Joe Johnston’s contribution to the transmedia Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). This film restores to the mythos its trappings, as well as the character’s defense of America against the Nazi threat.

One of the film’s first sequences introduces its main supervillain, the Red Skull (Hugo Weaving), a confidant of Hitler, a devotee of Teutonic myth, and the commander of Hydra, the Nazis’ technoscientific research unit and

fascist death cult. The Red Skull obtains the Tesseract, a companion weapon to the Aether in *Thor: The Dark World* that the villain describes as at one time “the jewel of Odin’s treasure room.” The film then cuts to New York, where the skinny asthmatic Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) receives another 4F notice from a draft committee. He afterwards receives a thrashing in an alley for reprimanding someone at a movie theatre for not showing respect while a war-time newsreel screens. Rogers, though, in an intimation of subsequent events, uses a trashcan cover as a makeshift shield, checking the attacker until draftee James “Bucky” Barnes (Sebastian Stan) shows up and stops the fight. He says to Rogers, “You don’t know when to give up,” attesting to the future superhero’s courage, mettle, and doggedness. Rogers tries to enlist again after seeing the new technologies on display at an exhibition—a canny allusion to the 1940 New York World’s Fair, which Alex Boney (2013) describes as a major influence on the development of the superhero in modern America—reminding Bucky that the war effort calls for self-sacrifice, not egotism (44). The rest of the film divides into three acts, the first of which focuses on Rogers’ interaction with Dr. Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci), a German Jewish scientist and defector working on a Super Soldier Serum for the Americans. Erskine seeks out “qualities beyond the physical” in a test subject, finding them in Rogers, whom the scientist calls “a good man” while motioning towards the future Captain America’s *heart*.

Erskine uses the serum, as well as a shower of “vita rays,” to turn Rogers into a superhero able to counter the Red Skull, a recipient of an earlier version of the treatment that turns the Nazi’s face into an actual *Totenkopf*, misshapen and scarlet in color. After a Hydra agent murders Erskine, a senator decides to turn Rogers into Captain America, a movie star, comics icon, United Service Organization tour emcee, and musical act in the vein of such films as Michael Curtiz’s *This Is the Army* (1943). The next act, though, sees Captain America enter combat, rescuing Bucky and a number of other soldiers from the Red Skull. After Captain America frees these men, he recruits some of them to carry out attacks on Hydra, one of which ends with Bucky apparently falling to death from a train that carries the Nazi eugenicist Arnim Zola (Toby Jones). This event segues into the film’s final act, as Captain America infiltrates a Hydra fortress in the Alps to confront the Red Skull, who conspires to use the energies of the Tesseract to destroy major U.S. urban centers, among them New York City. After the Tesseract seems to consume the supervillain, Captain America forces the aircraft carrying the weapon to crash in the Arctic. He remains frozen there for 70 years, after which scientists and S.H.I.E.L.D. agents discover, revive, and start to acclimatize him to twenty-first century American culture.

After the Super Soldier Serum endows Rogers with the musculature of an action film star—with what Yvonne Tasker calls “musculinity” in reference to such weightlifter actors as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Linda Hamilton—the superhero immediately chases after the Hydra

agent that shot Erskine (149). He exerts, tests out, and develops sensorimotor habits out of these new conditions of embodiment, running indefatigably down the streets of New York while dodging the shots of the Hydra agent, vaulting easily over a tall fence, and recovering quickly after failing to negotiate a turn and crashing through a shop window. Erskine, although about to die, once again motions towards Steve Rogers' *heart*, as the film recodes the U.S. Army reject's integrity, tenacity, and compassionateness into strength, fighting acumen, and cardiovascular endurance. The cardiac organ, in short, overdetermines and transforms into the rest of the muscles that identify Captain America as a superhuman figure and an action star, although one more adverse to violence than Stallone's or Schwarzenegger's characters—an action star, in short, “with a heart.” Captain America's chevron, the U.S. military star, thus spans his chest, even though it does more than equate, in a rather cliché manner, the cardiac muscle with courage, national service, and war-time sacrifice. More complexly, the five-point chevron draws out the correspondence of Captain America's superpowers with the autorhythmicity of coronary circulation. The character derives these abilities from an infusion of Super Solider Serum, alongside a short-term exposure to “vita rays,” two factors that re-elaborate, first, the workings of our cardiac chambers, as they metabolize, oxygenate, and supply blood to our other major organs; and then those of our atrioventricular and sinoatrial nodes, as they regulate the electrical impulses that trigger the contractile movements of our myocardial cells. Thus the five-point star on Captain America's chest signals more than duty to country, as it also indicates the five stages of our cardiac cycle, over the course of which the semilunar and atrioventricular valves swell up, contract, compress, and eject the fluids in them into our other systems, after which they relax and close once more. These systolic–diastolic cardiac rhythms also make some metamorpho-physiological sense out of the rather unusual use-values of Captain America's trademark weapon.

Howard Stark (Dominic Cooper), the father of Iron Man, another future member of the Avengers, designs Captain America's costume, armoring, and circular shield, which also sports a star at its center. Captain America uses this weapon endo-prosthetically throughout the film: it returns to him immediately after it strikes one of the Red Skull's minions, ricocheting off of a nearby tree. More interestingly, in the film's final sequence, after Captain America throws the shield at a Hydra agent, narrative circumstances foil the character's attempts to retrieve it. Nonetheless, after an elaborate mini-sequence in which he commandeers a single-engine craft to return to the Red Skull's airship, Captain America recovers the weapon, a rare case of *a superbody returning to its endo-prosthetic extension*, rather than vice versa. The shield, in any case, functions to contract distances in filmic space, so that Captain America can strike at targets normally impossible for most men or women to reach. Once the shield returns, the visual register in the film tends to “relax,” calming down to an extent as Captain America suppresses the activities on the

screen of Hydra agents, supervillains, or alien marauders. The shield contains the same symbol as the one on Captain America's costume—significantly, the star straddles its sternum—so that, when this weapon spirals across the screen, it seems almost as though it were displacing the *very content of the character's chest area* into distant removes of diegetic space for a short time. Thus this shield-heart rearticulates the movements of the systolic–diastolic cardiac cycle, over the course of which the sinoatrial node depolarizes or changes the electric charge of the atria and then the ventricles, causing them to alternately contract and relax, analogous to the way Captain America uses the weapon to close distances to enemies or targets onscreen, reopening these distances after it returns.

Jason Dittmer, noting the endo-prosthetic construction of the character, also calls attention to its ideologico-symbolic meanings, arguing that while “Captain America has become quite good at throwing his shield as an offensive weapon (and always managing to have it bounce right back to him), it is important for the narrative of America that he embodies defense rather than offense” (630). However, the defense this superhero stands for consists of more than a shield. Captain America retains two additional measures of defense: a uniform of stealth scale armor able to resist Iron Man's repulsors, as in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon 2015), as well as a sheath of dense muscle that allows him, unlike asthmatic alter ego Steve Rogers, to weather the attacks of the Red Skull, a fellow Super Soldier test subject. These three layers of defense—the shield, the armor, and the character's thick musculature—once more re-elaborate the structure and functions of the heart. The cardiac wall consists of three strata: more specifically, the epicardium, which encloses the organ and fixes it to the chest cavity; the myocardium, which forms its muscle tissue; and the endocardium, which controls its contractile movements. The film's “defensive” character design corresponds to these three tissue strata, as the uniform encloses Captain America; the Super Soldier experiment thickens his muscles; and the shield “contracts” the objects in the *mise-en-scène*, spiraling off one and then another of them so that he can modulate the rhythms of the action, even from a distance.

Captain America: The First Avenger, though, does throw its title superhero's “heart,” so to speak, into a dramatization of the American value-system, specifically its commitment to free market commerce. Matthew Vernon (2016) claims that the *Captain America* series trades on nostalgia for a cultural icon, which at the same time makes untenable the desire for a more modern national-heroic narrative. He argues that these films call attention to “the origins of the Captain America character as both a form of entertainment and a propaganda tool,” which in turn underscores their status as an “entertaining diversion and an allegorical representation of the nation” (125). The first act of the film, not coincidentally, sets the scene in which Steve Rogers makes the decision that will result in his transformation into Captain America at a new technologies exhibition. Abraham Erskine, Howard

Stark, and the “captains” of U.S. institutions that convene at the Super Soldier experiment thus treat the eager recruit as one of these new technologies—after it, he even test drives the new superbody the Serum effects. These forces refashion Steve Rogers as Captain America, selling this new star commodity through a series of films, musical revues, and USO tours. The first act of the film therefore sensationalizes the initial stages of mediatic wealth creation, namely the *market introduction* of commodifiable images and then the saturation *advertising* of them to mass audiences. After Captain America develops a degree of stardom, he embarks on an overseas campaign, at once fighting against the forces of Hydra and also spreading “brand recognition” to nondomestic markets. The Red Skull, during one of Captain America’s raids on Hydra’s control centers, even tells him, “I’m a great fan of your films.” The second act of the film, then, corresponds to *market development* and *mass distribution*, as commodities enter new channels and circulate within them, much as Captain America enters the European theatre of war, coming up with new film footage of the soldiers’ exploits while there.

The superhero, after commandeering the Red Skull’s airship, crashes it to save New York City. The epilogue cuts from a shot of children in the 1940s imitating Captain America—complete with stars on their trashcan “shields,” a callback to Steve Roger’s fight in the theatre alley earlier in the film—to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s twenty-first century revival of the character. After reawakening, Captain America runs down Times Square, stopping in astonishment at the multiple screens flashing slogans and show times. The final act of the film thus stages the *investment return* on the star image and then its *accumulation*, since industrial capitalism manufactures more commodities than their use-value might otherwise dictate. Captain America, the film suggests, after falling into decline, remains “on ice” for a few decades, until the agents of the Marvel Cinematic Universe rediscover and reintroduce the character to contemporary audiences. Captain America can now experience much more name recognition on digital screens, such as the ones in Time Square, than at movie theaters in the 1940s, as the almost forgotten cultural status of the *Captain America* serial attests. This commercial sequence—entry, circulation, return—might also describe the shield’s endo-prosthetic movements in the film’s action scenes, or even the rush of fluids out of our aorta, through our other corpora, and into our cardiac valves once again. This sequence, with its analogues, allows us to map the relationship of Captain America’s superhuman embodiment to the film’s visual, diegetic, and narrative constructions in the following way:

Heart: Service Star $\propto$ Shield: Commodity Circulation

The evil of the Red Skull, whose face resembles the meat of raw muscle tissue, might stem from the fact that the trial version of the Super Solider Serum effectively *dislocates his heart onto his head*. The film, as it opposes this villain to the more compassionate Captain America, restages the conflict

of rationalism and emotionalism at the core of such films as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). This film thematizes the separation of the "head" and the "hands," the capitalist executives and the working classes, in an industrial dystopia, one that, according to Thomas Elsaesser (2000), set forth the idea for some critics of "a new kind of (media-made) subjectivity, cut loose from political action and personal relations" (46). Thus the figure of the "heart" in the film, a female evangelist and trader in abstractions, rather than the workers themselves, must mediate the relation of the "head" to the "hands."

Arnim Zola replaces the Red Skull in Anthony and Joe Russo's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) as the emblem of cool, "heartless" rationalism. Zola, who, the film tells us, develops a terminal illness in the 1970s, exists only as a discarnate "head," a digital consciousness that exists on thousands of meters of data tape. He even tells Captain America and the Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), who stumble across the computer equipment containing Zola's consciousness in one of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s earliest intelligence terminals, that the two of them "are standing in my brain." The film centers on Zola's development of a data-mining algorithm for Hydra that will allow the organization to take over the three new Helicarriers that S.H.I.E.L.D. wants to station in "continuous suborbital flight," as director Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) tells Captain America, so that they can surveil terrorist suspects. This scheme, reminiscent of the controversies surrounding former NSA subcontractor Edward Snowden, the whistleblower on the agency's mass surveillance on Western citizens in covert cooperation with telecommunication companies, ironically crystallizes after the superheroes decrypt Zola's data-point at an Apple store in a suburban mall. This moment in the film implicates cellphones and other digital devices in "Project Insight," the name for the spy satellite initiative—as the villain says, "The twenty-first century is a digital book" open to extralegal, crypto-fascist state agencies. The scheme thus also involves Hydra's infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D., from its strike forces all the way to the top of its administrative chain. One of these sleeper agents, the S.H.I.E.L.D. official Alexander Pierce (Robert Redford),¹⁵ conspires to frame Nick Fury, discredit Captain America, and use mysterious assassin the Winter Solider to ensure Hydra's success. Pierce thus functions as the film's "anti-heart," falsely mediating the relation of the "heads" of the spy agency to its "hands," or to those who trust in it and work for it. He does so in service to another "head," that of Zola, while making use of Brock Rumlow (Frank Grillo) and the other treasonous members of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s counterterrorist team.

Which character represents the "hands" in this film, "cut loose" from the more class-driven allegories of *Metropolis*? The Winter Solider does, in that this assassin, who uses sniper rifles, rocket launchers, and combat daggers throughout the narrative, mostly relies on a cyborgic arm with superhuman strength, reaction time, and resilience when fighting such superheroic opponents as Captain America, the Black Widow, and the Falcon (Anthony

Mackie). The Winter Soldier uses the arm to rip the door off of Nick Fury's SUV; to cling to vehicles while they race down freeways; and even to catch Captain America's shield in midair as though it were a Frisbee, returning it with such force that it causes the superhero to slide on concrete. The Winter Soldier exemplifies Mark Oehlert's (2000) "bio-tech integrator," or a cyborg that can refigure, although not necessarily alter or remove, these sorts of system upgrades (115, 116). His somatotype thus seems uniquely epi-prosthetic, in that the arm confers certain superhuman attributes that the rest of the Winter Soldier's flesh does not seem to share in. He can use the arm, although not any other appendage, to deflect Captain America's shield strikes without taking any damage from them, for example. To separate the arm from the shoulder, though, might render it inert—in the film, if not the comics—and redefine the Winter Soldier's abilities as more exo-prosthetic, as more akin to those of Hawkeye or the Punisher. The character's design, as it accents this metallic arm, thus literalizes the role of "hired hand," with the Winter Soldier embodying the strong-arm tactics that Hydra favors. He even wears a Soviet star near the shoulder of the cybernetic arm, a variation on the chevron of Captain America, who, as an exponent of democratic, constitutional, and capitalist values, seems the villain's ideological counterpoint. Captain America unmasks the Winter Soldier midway through the film, though, as fellow World War II veteran Bucky Barnes, who survives the fall from the train in *The First Avenger* only for Hydra to capture and reprogram the character into an assassin. Zola's experiments, in effect, sink the alloy of Captain America's shield-heart into the Winter Soldier's flesh, making the character inhuman to an extent. The villain implicitly "hardens the heart" of the Winter Soldier, displacing the star, the metamorpho-physiological refiguration of our cardiac structure, from the chest, where it sits on Captain America's uniform, onto the strong cyborgic arm of the assassin. The superhero decides to reform Bucky, reestablish their friendship, and mute Hydra's toxic influence on him. Thus Captain America functions as the "heart" of the film, intervening into the relation of the "hands," as the Winter Soldier represents them, to the "heads" of the terrorist organization, namely Zola, Pierce, and the officials that surreptitiously serve it. The superhero, in other words, aspires to make Bucky recognize that *he wears his heart on his sleeve*.

While not exactly a counterhegemonic force in *The Winter Soldier*, Captain America nevertheless resists the totalitarian measures that S.H.I.E.L.D. and Hydra want to implement. As Captain America tells Nick Fury in relation to Project Insight, "This isn't freedom, this is fear." Once again, though, in this case "freedom" might refer to the economic liberalism, and not only the antifascist attitudes, that the superhero came to represent since the 1940s. Although the film does not enact the circulation of commodities across a three-act narrative arc, it nonetheless expands the range of the commodity forms that Captain America stands for in the age of information capitalism. First, Captain America confronts the commodification of *the past*, visiting the

Smithsonian in civilian clothes and surveying an exhibit featuring the costume, motorcycle, and records of the exploits from *The First Avenger*. These sign-commodities trade on a collective form of nostalgia, on the memories of cultural moments that exist more in the imagination than “real life,” as with Hollywood’s celebration of its own star images, set designs, and musical numbers in such films as Jack Haley Jr.’s *That’s Entertainment!* (1974). Steve Rogers, after feeding on this nostalgia, turns and sees an adolescent wearing a Captain America T-shirt at the museum, thus facing another form of commodification, that of *the present*. The T-shirt and other such sign-commodities market the trademark as an object of consumer value, over and above its usual functions, which include identifying an item’s source of origin or rights of intellectual ownership. Captain America, in a rather meta-mediatized moment, thus encounters the cross-promotion strategies that Hollywood uses to sell toys, clothes, foods, and collectables in addition to tickets to such films as *The Winter Soldier*.

Finally, in the film’s climax, Captain America commodifies *the future*; the superhero, after overriding the systems of the Helicarriers and causing them to crash, refuses to fight Bucky and compels him to experience a crisis of conscience. The Winter Solider drags Captain America out of the river, saving the character for future installments of the Marvel series. As it denies its audience a climactic fight scene, *The Winter Soldier* seems to take risks absent from most superhero films. Of course, the film moderates this risk, in that it also sells us on the transmedia future of its two title characters (who will reappear in the sequel and the epilogue to Peyton Reed’s 2015 *Ant-Man*), on these “media-made subjectivities,” as Hollywood seems so anxious to do after the success of *The Avengers*. At any rate, these three sign-commodities do not constitute separate consumerist modalities; rather they remain in a state of constant interimplication in the film. After fishing Captain America from the river, Bucky visits the Smithsonian, the superhero’s actions obviously inspiring his reinvestment in the nostalgic displays there. These sign-commodities reinforce one another over the course of the narrative’s circular movements, which thus resemble in shape Captain America’s shield-heart.

Captain America continues to use this weapon in endo-prosthetic ways in *The Winter Soldier*, although with more versatility. He uses it as a material object, defending against martial arts attacks, crashing through windows, and clobbering enemies with it. He also “converts” it into a digital artifact, throwing it so that it flies off of elements in the *mise-en-scène*, striking down terrorists and even an aircraft of equally digital design. He even uses it to cushion the impact of falling several stories from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s office complex after fighting off an elevator full of Pierce’s agents. The next film in the series, Joe and Anthony Russo’s *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), further develops the shield’s endo-prosthetic functions, as it follows the machinations of Helmut Zemo (Daniel Brühl), a terrorist who frames the Winter Solider for the assassination of T’Chaka (John Kani), the monarch of the fictional

African nation of Wakanda and father of the superhero the Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman). Zemo sows dissension among the Avengers, with Captain America and Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.) taking different stances on the Sokovia Accords, which will force these superheroes to submit to the oversight of the United Nations and observe its directives. Captain America, who refuses to sign the accords, enlists the Falcon, the Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen), Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), and Ant-Man (Paul Rudd) to assist in clearing the fugitive Winter Soldier's name. To arrest them, Iron Man assembles War Machine (Don Cheadle), the Black Widow, the Vision (Paul Bettany), Spider-Man (Tom Holland), and the Black Panther, who seeks retribution for the murder of T'Chaka. Captain America, throughout the film's action sequences, uses the shield to deflect enemies' attacks, temper the force of explosions, crack open Iron Man's armor, slice through ankle-cuffs and other such deterrents, and strike at faraway targets, compelling Spider-Man to comment, after seeing it almost always somehow return to its owner, "That thing does not obey the laws of physics at all."

More interestingly, Captain America redefines other characters as endo-prosthetic over the course of the film. His efforts to stop Iron Man from raging against the Winter Soldier after finding out that the assassin was responsible for the deaths of Howard (John Slattery) and Maria Stark (Hope Davis) in 1991 inspires the Black Panther to forswear revenge, to arrest rather than murder Zemo, and to ultimately support Captain America's cause. The Black Panther, who unsheathes claws strong enough to tear through metal, in the manner of DC's Catwoman, retracts them after stopping Zemo from committing suicide, a scene that confirms their endo-prosthetic re-elaboration of the structure and function of our fingernails. The Falcon, whom mechanical wings and thrusters enable to fly, somersault in the air, and spy on enemies from above, in contrast seems a more epi-prosthetic character: damaging the wings "grounds" the Falcon, much as rendering the superhero unconscious makes the wings useless. *Civil War*, though, marks the onscreen debut of Redwing, the character's falcon companion that the film adapts into a drone craft. The Falcon uses Redwing as a surveillance device, an endo-prosthetic extension that returns on cue and also modifies the film's visual compositions. The camera in *Civil War* starts to act too as a stealth drone, weaving its way through the sky and underneath street vehicles in a way that seems impossible for traditional or even CG film technologies to replicate authentically.

However, the most striking endo-prosthetic redefinition of a character's superpowers in the film centers on the Winter Soldier, whom Zemo reprograms into a mindless assassin again. The Soldier runs from the Avengers factions, using the cyborg arm to stop from skidding while on a motorcycle, to clasp onto railings while falling from the top of a missile silo, and to resist the attacks of the other superheroes. However, Iron Man eventually severs the arm from its root, and afterwards the Soldier asks to enter a

state of cryogenic suspension until the others can curb Hydra's influence on the character. Alongside the Black Panther, Captain America assents to these demands, watching the Soldier return to sleep without first reattaching the cyborg arm. The Soldier's narrative arc in the film curiously resembles that of another endo-prosthetic character from the silent era, the amputee tramp (Paul Penzer) from J. Stuart Blackton's *The Thieving Hand* (1908). After mistakenly taking an item from a rich man, the tramp returns it and receives in recompense a new arm from a store that specializes in "Artificial Limbs," as its marquee says. However, the arm operates independently of its new owner, stealing several items from those walking on the street on which the tramp asks for alms. He eventually notices these thefts, reprimands the arm, and sells it to a shopkeeper. The arm, climbing on its own out of the display, crawls over to the tramp, sitting fast asleep on a curb, and reattaches itself to the man's shoulder, as though it were an endo-prosthetic weapon in a superhero film. Thinking that the tramp stole the arm, the shopkeeper demands the man's incarceration, after which the arm returns to its original criminal owner. The tramp, over the course of this short film, thus cannot trust the artificial arm, whereas the robotic arm in *Civil War* cannot always quite trust the Winter Soldier, so to speak, to use it in a superheroic way. Captain America thus oversees the stockpiling of one of the film's major sign-commodities, as it sets the Soldier "on ice" so that Marvel can use him to spark interest in future installments of the series. Moreover, in the comics, the cyborg arm can move about when free from the rest of the Soldier's flesh, much as in *The Thieving Hand*. *Civil War* thus ends with the strong chance that the Soldier will develop into a true endo-prosthetic character—in short, into someone *closer again to Captain America's heart*.

CONCLUSION

The endo-prosthetic somatotype encompasses a number of forms of superhuman embodiment that, on the surface, appear disparate and totally unlike one another. Nonetheless, the ways that these superheroes move, act, or transmute on the screen, often through the use of digital techniques, share one significant common denominator: they enlarge the structures, functions, and virtual capacities of our organs, tissues, membranes, or other corpora, which sever off or stretch out into diegetic areas simply impossible for the other characters to reach. As these extremities—or, more commonly, their objective correlatives, in the form of trademark weapons—return on their own and reunite with the rest of a character's flesh, *they literally redefine the limits of the human body and what it is capable of in film*. These superheroes, in every case, derive their abilities from the imaginative fusion of our regular organisms with the tool-being of nonhuman objects, whether metallic, as with Blade; animal, as with Loki; or abstract-symbolic, as with Captain America. Simultaneously, these superpowers encourage us to think of our own organs,

cells, or fluids as objects, the inner nature of which withdraws from our cognition or even direct sense-experience, teaching us to wonder at their mysterious workings and virtual capabilities. What if such objects do not return to the superheroes in these sorts of films, though? This question moves us into our “x-ray” of the exo-prosthetic somatotype, as it describes superpowers of a more excremental nature.

Anatomy of the Superhero Film Will Continue...

NOTES

1. One of the other ancestors of the endo-prosthetic superhero in early silent cinema is the trickster figure Felix the Cat, the creation of Otto Messmer and Pat Sullivan for a series of cartoon shorts running from 1919 to 1928. Throughout the series, Felix appears able to detach his tail, to reconfigure it into simple tools to deal with specific narrative obstacles, and to reattach it without needing the assistance of a surgeon or a cyberneticist. Although not a superhero, Felix nonetheless serves as an important, if not altogether obvious, template for such endo-prosthetic comics characters as Captain America and Thor, whose weapons always return to them, much as does the cat’s tail.
2. Jeffrey A. Brown (2001) argues that the armor Blade wears might rather mark him in more racist, misogynist ways, in that it iterates the stereotype of “the black man [...] being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily” (27, 28). Jonathan Gayles (2012) concurs, arguing that *Blade* “reproduces racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies,” since the “masculine assertions” of its main character dominate the film’s white antagonists “at the expense of black women” (297). These readings, while definitely incisive, ignore the queer implications of the first film. Two female vampires in the opening sequence fellate Quinn—in other words, they suck the vampire off. Blade, near the film’s climax, sucks Karen’s neck, the male superhero now enacting the sexually feminine role of these two women from the dance club.
3. The equation of our teeth with sharp weapons, such as swords and daggers, is not all that strange or uncommon in the annals of film. In Zoltan Korda’s 1942 version of *The Jungle Book*, for example, Mowgli (Sabu), while flourishing a dagger, exclaims to the tiger Shere Khan, “I’m not afraid of you, now that I have my tooth!”
4. John J. Jordan (1999) also calls attention to the fact that the temple resembles a centrifuge, in that it functions to separate the film’s antiheroes from its vampire villains (14).
5. This shot cribbs from a similar one in *From Hell* (Albert and Allen Hughes 2001), an adaptation of the Alan Moore comic about the manhunt for Jack the Ripper. The murderer at one moment seems to slash open the screen, allowing some traces of the visible to creep into an otherwise completely dark frame. The really astonishing aspect of this composition, though, is that it repositions the spectator *inside the flesh, or rather the dark innards*, of one of the Ripper’s victims. Unlike the superhero film, *From Hell* does not expose the virtual capacities of our insides; it only viscerally reminds us of their vulnerability to sharp objects.

6. This camera trick re-creates a similar one from Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* (1992), in which the title character of that film throws a remote control Batarang at four villains, the course of which we follow through the air. Unlike the silver shuriken, though, and true to the more exo-prosthetic nature of the *Batman* films, this weapon does not return to the superhero who threw it, the dog of one of the villains catching it and carrying it off.
7. *Daredevil* contrasts the fastness of the neuroperceptual operations of the title superhero's sense-organs to the slowness of those of the film's ordinary characters. After acquiring these super-abilities, a montage sequence shows the adolescent Murdock digitally-internally envisioning the film's environment via the vibrations in it. The tempo of the sequence then quickens, as Murdock deftly runs, slides, and vaults from one rooftop to another. His father, though, tunes out most of this sense-information. Matt's cries only reach Jack's ears, for example, when the fighter collapses to the ring during the match with opponent John Romita, Jr. (whose name comes from a Marvel comic artist for the *Daredevil* series). Jack stands up and wins the contest; in the film's next scene, though, mobsters murder Matt's father in slow motion for ruining the fix. This use of slow motion, more than accenting a traumatic moment for the adolescent, serves to corroborate Massumi's idea that our flesh modulates our experience of our material realities, as it traces onto them the "slowness" of its visual-cortical mechanisms in order to outline those "things" we can see, relate to, and cognize.
8. *Daredevil*'s ability to form digital schematics of diegetic environments in order to win fights, swing through the air, or otherwise determine the outcome of certain narrative situations went on to inspire the creation of similar characters in non-superhero films. Sherlock Holmes, in the two Guy Ritchie films that update that character, seems able to digitally render action scenes in order to calculate enemies' movements and effectively react to them. Sylvester Stallone's character Ray Breslon in Mikael Häfström's *Escape Plan* (2013) similarly constructs digital readouts of maximum security facilities in order to test them for weaknesses, devise ways to circumvent them, and ultimately slip free from them.
9. "United Allied" might allude to the conservative Citizens United nonprofit that fought for the 2010 Supreme Court decision to allow corporate electioneering and that, according to its website, intends to reassert "the traditional American values" of free enterprise, national sovereignty, and the nuclear family. Similarly, Wilson Fisk wants to make New York "a better place, a place for its citizens to feel safe, to feel pride," tellingly saying so in a speech to the city's elite.
10. For further discussion of the stigmas and "supernatural" qualities that Western culture attaches to menstruation, see the chapter on *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg 1979) in Larrie Dudenhoeffer (2014), *Embodiment and Horror Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
11. As Vivian Sobchack (2014) argues, the magic enchantments that endow Thor with world-altering abilities function as "what we might articulate as (im)mediacy: superheroes just 'have' the power of technology," enabling them "to hyperbolize" our own use of "transparent digital devices" that efface spatial distance and rewire our sense of causality (296).

12. Alice Nuttall (2016) argues that Loki's magical shape-shifting abilities turn on "the Gothic concept of the unstable and fragmented body," with queer and anti-patriarchal implications for the *Thor* series (63). This fragmentation, in a more speculative realist vein, translates onscreen into the cracking of the Bifröst in the first film and contrasts with the tensile cooperation of the muscles in Thor's arm, wrists, and fists.
13. Simcha Weinstein (2006) argues that Captain America, the creation of Jewish artists, serves as a Golem-figure; they even stamp the aleph, the first character of the Semitic alphabet, on the soldier-superhero's mask (50–51). For more on Captain America's Marvel cohort in relation to the Golem, see Robert Weiner, "Marvel Comics and the Golem Legend," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 29.2 (2011): 50–72.
14. J. Richard Stevens (2015) also contrasts the 1944 serial to its comics source material, drawing attention to its non-superhuman representation of its main character: "Possessing no obvious superpowers or strength, Captain America uses brute force to bring criminals to justice. In his first adventure, he shoots one of the first henchmen he meets" (258). The Grant Gardner version of Captain America, in other words, acts no more extraordinarily than the fighters in such earlier serials as *Red Barry* (Ford Beebe and Alan James 1938). Blair Davis (2017) also assesses the non-superheroic tenor of the 1944 serial, concluding that, unlike the earlier adaptations of Captain Marvel and Batman, "*Captain America* lacks [their] faithfulness in setting, characterization, and narrative tone" (102–103).
15. The casting of Robert Redford as Alexander Pierce adds some depth to the film's conspiracy narrative, since the actor was the star of a number of thrillers with similar storylines, such as Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), and Tony Scott's *Spy Game* (2001). Moreover, the actor in the 1970s and 1980s was similar in appearance to Steve Rogers, or rather to the way the character was drawn in those decades. Chris Evans's interaction with Robert Redford onscreen thus comes across as a meeting of two different visions of Captain America from two different cultural moments in American media.

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