



The red death: American exceptionalism and U.S.S.R. representations in Marvel's *Black Widow*

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study is to analyse U.S.S.R. representations in Marvel's film *Black Widow* (Feige & Shortland, 2021). This object has been chosen because it provides us with a U.S.A. perspective upon a Soviet protagonist – who is here given a chance of telling 'her' story. More specifically, even though Natasha Romanoff's (the Black Widow) narrative is the centre of the story, the analytical focus is on another character: Alexi Alanovich Shostakov, the Red Guardian (the Soviet Union's version of Captain America). That is, although the protagonist as long as other issues related to her story are addressed by the study here and then, Alexi's story is put in the spotlight for he emerges as a vintage token of the ideological war between U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. The enemy of the world, for a long time now, is, for some reason, still the red threat. Maybe more than never, everything that goes against the status quo is taken as a communist idea. Therefore, more broadly, this study investigates if and how such anti-communism, deriving from the Cold War, has also been spread through the construction of Marvel superheroes and their adversaries.

Keywords: red guardian; Natasha Romanoff; U.S.S.R.; American exceptionalism.

A morte vermelha: Excepcionalismo americano e representações da União Soviética no filme *Viúva Negra*, da Marvel

RESUMO. O objetivo deste estudo é analisar representações da U.S.S.R. no filme *Viúva Negra*, da Marvel (Feige & Shortland, 2021). Este objeto foi escolhido porque ele fornece uma perspectiva dos E.U.A. acerca de uma protagonista soviética – que ganha a chance de contar sua 'própria' história. Mais especificamente, apesar da história de Natasha Romanoff (a *Viúva Negra*) ser o centro da narrativa, o foco analítico é outro personagem: Alexi Alanovich Shostakov, o Guardião Vermelho (a versão da União Soviética do Capitão América). Isto é, ainda que a protagonista, bem como outras questões relacionadas a sua história, seja, por vezes, abordada no estudo, a história de Alexi é privilegiada, já que ele surge como um ícone obsoleto da guerra ideológica entre Estados Unidos e União Soviética. O inimigo do mundo, já por muito tempo, segue sendo a ameaça vermelha, por algum motivo. Talvez mais do que nunca, tudo que diverge do status quo é considerado "coisa de comunista". Deste modo, de uma maneira mais abrangente, esse estudo investiga se e de que maneira esse anticomunismo, que data da Guerra Fria, também tem sido disseminado através da construção dos super-heróis da Marvel e de seus adversários.

Palavras-chave: guardião vermelho; Natasha Romanoff; União Soviética; Excepcionalismo americano.

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Introduction

The title for this study makes a reference to Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The mask of the red death* (Poe, 2012). In the story, characters who are infected with this fictitious disease present sharp pains, sudden dizziness and profuse bleeding at the pores, dying in only half an hour. The colour red, as the colour black, has been historically associated with sin, evil, and death – and this is a far too constant fact to be deemed occasional and/or a coincidence. One of the many possibilities that pullulate in-between the lines of this master narrative is, of course, the communist/socialist stigma and its condemnation. Before, during, and after Cold War, U.S.A. governments have mastered the art of providing the world with fictional narratives for manipulating public opinions to favour their agenda. "Thus, the articulation of such narratives has possibly favoured the American claims to world leadership and, consequently, American imperialism" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 14).

That taken into account, the purpose of this study is to analyse U.S.S.R. representations in Marvel's film *Black Widow* (Feige & Shortland, 2021). This object has been chosen because it provides us with a U.S.A. perspective upon a soviet protagonist – who is here given a chance of telling 'her' story. More specifically, even though Natasha Romanoff's (the Black Widow) narrative is the centre of the story, the analytical focus is on another character: Alexi Alanovich Shostakov, the Red Guardian (the Soviet Union's version of Captain America). That is, although the protagonist as long as other issues related to her story are addressed by the study here and then, Alexi's story is put in the spotlight for he emerges as a vintage token of the ideological war between U.S.A. versus U.S.S.R. In 2021, long after the Cold War and the victory of capitalism over communism, it would be right to say that we have reached another sort of Red Death; after all, the real possibility of a Marxist revolution looks rather far from us. Nevertheless, even as a reminiscence of such past, it seems that the Soviet caricature has already been established, and it shall take some more time for it to be replaced by something else.

Now constantly adapted to the screens, comic books date back in history, and are among the many discourses that also serve to nourish a certain political agenda. A good example of that is the story of *Civil war* (Millar, 2006). In this comic book, superheroes fight against one another – led, at one side, by the Iron Man and, at the other, by Captain America. The reason for their divide is a fictional legislation set forward by the United Nations and the U.S.A., aimed at regulating superhero actions. When heroes are called to sign the document and expose their real identities, a civil war explodes, bringing death and destruction to the country. Eventually, the superhero team which is against the act surrenders and everyone accepts to be exposed for the sake of their safety, and the safety of fellow U.S.A. citizens.

The legislation that brings so much trouble in this story is coherent with the Patriot Act proposed by George W. Bush. Dividing U.S.A. public opinion, it also asked fellow citizens to sacrifice much of their personal freedom for their safety and the safety of the country. As it happens in *Civil war* (Millar, 2006), in the end people agree that their privacy is not as important as their safety, accepting government scrutiny as long as their safety is guaranteed. "Marvel's *Civil war* is only one example of the intricate links between comic books and American politics" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 2). Before and after the cold war, this depiction of political discourses might be spot in several comic books, reinforcing American exceptionalism and going from the blue and red uniforms of the U.S.A. strong, white, and heterosexual male heroes to the complex concoction of rather stereotypical enemies of the nation and of the world.

Discussion

Before joining the Avengers (in the company of Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Black Panther, Hawkeye, Doctor Strange, etc.), initially the Black Widow appears as a recurring villain in Iron Man's stories. At this point, in the words of Vergeti (2017, p. 46), Natasha Romanoff is depicted as "[...] a beautiful, well-educated and charming woman, who, nonetheless, works as a spy for the Soviets". Dressing the stereotype of the cunning and foxy spy, she sexually allures one of the Avengers convincing him to betray his country. As such, besides fitting in the sexist discourse to which women use their body to commit sin, making men deviate from their righteous path, she also makes an example that Soviet women, or people in general, are not to be trusted. "Additionally, the character's name itself also indicates her evil nature" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 46). As aforementioned, the colour black generally stands for darkness and evil. Originally, the Black Widow is a female spider named as such for she eats her male partner right after their sexual intercourse. Thus, it is interesting to see her condition shifted into that of a hero, after all her whole characterisation is pervaded by evil common senses.

If, historically, comic books like this one influence and are influenced by political culture, studying their content might help us get closer to the myths surrounding certain conceptualisations. One of the most ubiquitous one is American Exceptionalism: the idea that the U.S.A. is a special nation, the best in comparison to the others and also the nest of heroes, and therefore responsible for defending the whole planet against every threat. A delegate for his mother country values and meanings, as his name, shield and uniform all imply, Captain America "[...] attributes democracy and freedom to the United States, enhancing American exceptionalism and a missive feeling to spread and safeguard those values all around the globe, heralding the United States as a unique, positive force in the battle for world hegemony" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 39).

The notion that the world is safe due to Captain America is coherent with the notion that it is safe due to the U.S.A., a token of freedom and the nemesis of totalitarian regimes. "The promotion of American superiority against the Soviet Union and the celebration of democracy as a uniquely American feature underline the notion that

American people were exceptional” (Vergeti, 2017, p. 41). If something is unique about the U.S.A., everything is the same for the enemies of the world: in this case, the Russians. Against all evil, one must embrace U.S.A. for its power and leadership, regardless of the consequences. “Since exceptionalism strengthened America’s claim to world leadership, the propagation of this ideology through Captain America helped justify America’s actions, which aimed at the spread of American influence worldwide” (Vergeti, 2017, p. 41). At the same time, if U.S.A. values are to be taken as exceptional, Soviet ones are built as a repugnant thing:

ALEXEI: So, there I am ice fishing with my father. It’s very cold day in this little ice shed. Cold even for Russia, you know? ‘Keep the vodka by the fire,’ my father would say to me./YELENA: Please stop talking./ALEXEI: Please wait. Please wait./YELENA: Please, I don’t want to talk./ALEXEI: Please. Please. There is a reason why I’m telling you this, okay? Trust me. I am reaching for fish. Oh! I lose balance. Ah! Splash! My hands go in the river. In this weather, frostbite sets in quick. My father, he go toilet on my hands./YELENA: Oh, my God./ALEXEI: Urine is 35 degrees Celsius, staves off the frostbite./YELENA: How is this relevant?/ALEXEI: You know, fathers./YELENA: No. No. You have done nothing but tell me how bored you were. I was the chore, the job you didn’t want to do. To me? To me, you were everything. Exactly. You don’t care. You don’t care. The only thing you care about are your stupid glory days as the Crimson Dynamo, and no one wants to hear about it./ALEXEI: It’s the Red Guardian./YELENA: Get out. Get out! (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:21:43-01:23:08).

In this excerpt, Alexei tries to comfort his stepdaughter Yelena, Black Widow’s sister, after she starts crying during a discussion among the members of their dysfunctional family. Willing to share with her some parental knowledge, he tells her a short story about one of his “moments” with his own father. Expecting some sort of message, she listens with no interest, and, by the end, the unpleasant story is about the day when her grandfather peed on her father’s hands for them not to freeze. Besides the dysfunctional family itself, a handful of stereotypes emerge herein – especially, perhaps, the idea that for every Russian story there must be snow and there must be vodka.

Nevertheless, what bothers Yelena is not the disgusting aspect of this story, but the fact that she does not believe in her father’s intentions. Alexei constantly complains about the time he spent raising Natasha and Yelena, and the only thing he likes to remember is his past: when he fought as the Red Guardian (who she confuses with the Crimson Dynamo, another Soviet enemy of the Avengers). After listening to her argument, the only thing he does is correcting her – therefore, proving her point. The act of peeing working as an unexpected solution to an unexpected problem also emerges in Johnathan Swift’s *Gulliver Travels* (2008), first published in 1726. A giant among the small people of Lilliput, Gulliver pees to save them from a fire. As a metaphor to enlightenment, the character takes a pragmatic action in opposition to moralist ones, coherent with what Alexei’s father also does to save him from maybe losing his hands. Curiously, then, this memory tells us a lot regarding American moralist exceptionalism as something positive and accurate, at the same time opposed to the Soviet absence of morality – as a place of depraved, obscene, violent, and dirty characters. But let us look at the story he tells in his first appearance within the film:

ALEXEI: So, I have the nuclear code. But there he is. Captain America! Finally, the Red Guardian’s time has come! I grab hold of his shield and face to face, it’s a test of strength. That guy think he going to beat me. Anyway, this shield, you know, that he carries with him like a precious baby blanket, you know? I use it to my advantage. I take it and I push him out the window. And I make my escape. Huh?/URSA: What year was this?/ALEXEI: I don’t know. Like, ’83, ’84. I know./URSA: Captain America was still frozen in ice then./ALEXEI: Are you calling me a liar, Ursa, huh? (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 00:53:27-00:54:53).

In the other films produced by Marvel, the Red Guardian is never mentioned by anyone. Even though, since the first moment when he appears in *Black Widow* (Feige & Shortland, 2021), Alexei shows how obsessed he is with Captain America. The anti-father figure, his first scene is in the prison, before the two daughters that he had abandoned break him out. Here, one finds out that there are no powers for the Red Guardian. A cruel, rude, liar, old, and fat prisoner, he needs moreover to invent conflicts against Captain America in order to maintain his credibility. It is true that he is presented as a very strong man, in comparison to other normal human people. At the end of his first scene (Figure 1), when arm wrestling with Ursa (a man that looks much bigger), he punches his opponent’s wrist so strongly on the table that its bones are broken into pieces. Moreover, later he also runs with good speed and jumps incredibly high while trying to escape. His abilities, however, cannot be compared to those of Captain American: a real superhero with real superpowers.

Still in this arm wrestling scene, it is possible to see that Alexei also has many tattoos. Also taking into account the other moments when he appears shirtless, it is possible to see that besides paying tribute to his

daughters, wife, and his own (i.e. with a Red Guardian tattoo), there are also two of them where Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin's names are written in Russian. Furthermore, it is hard not to see the indirect effects of such image: a body covered in communist propaganda within a prison: the body of a criminal. If Captain America is a handsome, young, and righteous man embodying "universal" (though liberal) values, the Red Guardian is here depicted as a criminal who represents nothing but his own country, story, and past. More than a Soviet version of Captain America, the Red Guardian stands for everything U.S.A. fights against; basically, one could say he is the embodiment of the Red Scare. "The Red Scare was a dominant aspect of post-war American life and was characterized by a widespread series of actions by individuals and groups whose intentions were to frighten Americans with false and highly exaggerated charges of communist subversion" (Carleton, 2014, p. 4).



Figure 1. Arm wrestling scene (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 00:54:12).

Gradually, the Red Scare has been scattered worldwide; and by all means necessary. As a result, "[...] narratives associated to the Cold War ideology, which shaped the American national identity in the 1950s, might have influenced the public opinion in favour of America's ideological right to lead the world" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 59). Along with other master discourses harnessed in such direction, the birth and construction of Marvel superheroes and supervillains can be considered a rather significant contribution for this agenda. In the case of the Red Guardian, it is not only his own characterisation as a 'former strength', compared to Captain America, that plays a role in this sense. What surrounds the hero and the antihero are also issues to be taken into account – such as, for instance, the latter's two daughters (Figure 2):



Figure 2. Father and daughters (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:07:25).

Right after Natasha and Yelena save their father, their helicopter crashes and they have to walk all the way to Saint Petersburg hoping to find Melina (Alexei's fake wife and the girls fake mother). At this moment, one

might conclude their relationship has somewhat improved. But, before that, it is important to take into account that, if the Red Guardian himself is presented as an obsolete hero, so is everything about his escape. First of all, the fact that he was taken from the prison is rather relevant; why would a hero be imprisoned at all? Afterwards, their plan only work because Yelena accidentally starts an avalanche that covers the whole prison – and almost kills the family.

The helicopter they fly, old and defective, has nothing to do with the pompous and ostentatious machines operated by other heroes – like the X-men. Apropos, while these Russian fighters have no money, let us not forget that many U.S. heroes are played by very wealthy characters, which may be considered a clear elegy for capitalists. Among them one could think of Charles Xavier (X-Men founder), Bruce Wayne (Batman), Tony Stark (Iron Man), Danny Rand (Iron Fist), Oliver Queen (Green Arrow), etc. A caricature of what communists should sound like, for the neoliberal master narrative, the Red Guardian is not only contrary to such reality, but, actually, he overtly envies it:

ALEXEI: You should've brought the Avengers' super-jet./YELENA: I swear, if I hear one more word from him, I will kick him in the face./NATASHA: He's the worst./ALEXEI: Natasha! Natasha! Natasha! Come here, I want to ask you something. Come, it's important./NATASHA: What?/ALEXEI: Did he talk to you about me?/NATASHA: What?/ALEXEI: Did he talk to you about me? You know, trading war stories?/NATASHA: Who? What are you talking about?/ALEXEI: Captain America! My great adversary in this theatre of geopolitical conflict. Not so much a nemesis. More like a contemporary, you know? Coequal. I always thought there was a great deal of mutual respect.../NATASHA: Wait. You haven't seen either one of us in 20 years and you're gonna ask me about you?/ALEXEI: What is with this tension? Did I do something wrong?/YELENA: Is that a serious question?/ALEXEI: I only ever loved you girls. I did my best to make sure you would succeed to achieve your fullest potential, and everything worked out./NATASHA: Everything worked out?/ALEXEI: Yes. For you, yes! We accomplished our mission in Ohio. Yelena, you went on to become the greatest child assassin the world has ever known. No one can match your efficiency, your ruthlessness. And Natasha, not just a spy, not just toppling regimes, destroying empires from within, but an Avenger. You both have killed so many people. Your ledgers must be dripping, just gushing red. I couldn't be more proud of you./NATASHA: Okay. You can... No. Let go of me now./YELENA: You smell really bad (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:05:22-01:07:37).

Even though his two daughters have just saved him, Alexei's first reaction, right after they leave the useless helicopter and start walking, is to complain about the fact that Natasha has not brought the Avengers aeroplane instead. Ignored by the Black widow and her sister, the second thing he does is to call the former as to ask her something he deems really important: he wants to know if Captain America has ever mentioned him during their missions. Mad, she refuses to reply. But, from the audience experience watching every other film about the Avengers, one can remember that the Red Guardian is never mentioned by anyone whatsoever.

Alongside his irrelevance, Alexei's idolatry for Captain America is manifested since the first scene when he appears; and here, about fifteen minutes later, it is again reinforced. Then, as an attempt to alleviate all tension, he tells Natasha and Yelena about how proud he is of both. The reasons he is proud of them, however, are all but traditional. He loves them for they are ruthless, murderers: because they have killed so many people and destroyed so many things. Maybe, we could say that the fake Russian family represented by the Red Guardian construct emerges as an opposition to the idealised U.S. family. He is proud of his daughters for their evil accomplishments – i.e. an antihero that may be also deemed an anti-father.

With considerable difficulty, Alexei is able of dressing his Red Guardian suit in another scene (Figure 3). This is also a moment that deserves greater analysis. Far from providing the audience with those spectacular suiting up moments, such as superman slow-motion running while opening his shirt and popping the buttons or the Iron-Man industrious versions for this moment, the scene is ridiculous. There is an overweight and old man trying to fit in some red uniform that looks old and dirty, nothing comparable to U.S. heroes, even in their worse forms, such as Spiderman before developing what would become his ultimate suit, sponsored by Stark Industries. More adapted to U.S.A. manners than the supposedly Russian, Natasha tries to focus on her mission while the family idly chat. Her lack of an accent in comparison to her mother, sister and, specially, her father is representative of her physical, emotional and, especially, ideological migration to the Western reality. The only thing Soviet about her is her blood and origin, but everything she stands for is what one would understand as Imperial and capitalist U.S.A. values. The Red Guardian, contrary to his daughter's maturity, is arrogant, immature, stupid, and, after they get to Melina's house, he only wants to eat, eventually talking about sex in front of his kids – as a token of the U.S.S.R. supposed lack of moral compass.



Figure 3. The Red Guardian (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:11:20).

ALEXEI: Still fits./YELENA: Oh, my God./MELINA: I never washed it once. Come and drink./ALEXEI: Rise, you workers of salvation! Family back together again./MELINA: Mmm. Seeing as our family construct was just a calculated ruse that only lasted three years, I don't think that we can use this term anymore, can we?/NATASHA: Agreed. So, here's what's gonna happen.../ALEXEI: Okay. A reunion then, huh? And, uh... I want to say something right off the bat. You haven't aged a day, huh? [to Melina] You're just as beautiful and as supple as the day they staged our marriage./MELINA: You got fat. But still good./ALEXEI: I just got out of prison. I, uh... I have a lot of energy./MELINA: Oh!/NATASHA: Please don't do that (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:11:20-01:12:29).

In this scene, for the first time the whole family is together. His discourse is coherent with his tattoos of Marx and Lenin when the Red Guardian cries out the sentence: 'rise, you workers of salvation!', again providing us with a reference to communist ideals. Later, he manifests how satisfied he is for his family is finally back together. Everyone, nonetheless, emphasise the fake nature of such family. Nothing was real: their pictures are staged, their past an invention. Pretending, it seems, is an important element for the depiction of Russian values. The Black Widow first enters hero stories as a spy, a mole: someone who infiltrates and lies about her identity. "The fear of espionage, which is often propagated in the Captain America series, enhanced anti-communist feelings within American society and, consequently, justified hostility against the Soviet Union" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 63).

The Black Widow is originally a liar who comes from a family and a country of lies. As such, she opposes what being a hero, for the U.S. narrative, really means. Most of the suffering U.S.A. heroes go through has to do with the fact that a handful of them see themselves forced to hide their real identity as for their loved ones not to undergo any suffering. They need to lie only once and, even though, this is far too overwhelming for them. "Secondly, the conventionalization of gender roles and the celebration of fervent masculinity in Captain America stories affirmed social and sexual conformity, which was regarded as a key element in the battle against communism" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 63). Again, that the Black Widow is a female character makes her spying and deceitful nature more credible. As such, if, in the realm of representation, it is worth it for she is a woman hero, when one looks at the possible reasons for this to be so, things get a little dodgy.

U.S.A. heroes are mostly male, white, and heterosexual. This is the ideal, the pattern, and everything incoherent to that is as an exception. Morally superior, the battle between Captain America against either the Black Widow or the Red Guardian is the battle of a man with superpowers against either a false-hearted woman or an old rascal. U.S.A., again and always, is presented as unique, as American exceptionalism expands. "The promotion of American exceptionalism by means of moral superiority and exclusivity in the form of democracy intensified Americans' missive feelings to save the world and consequently lead it" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 63). The enemy of the world, for a long time now, is still the red threat. Maybe more than never, everything that goes against the status quo is taken as a communist idea: and such anti-communism, deriving from the Cold War, has also been spread through the construction of superheroes. The villains, however, must fit in the box of communist stereotypes.

In this scene, when the Black Widow is being attacked by the other Widows, her sister is able to throw the capsule with an antidote to free them from the control of their leader: Dreykov (Figure 4). When one looks at

the issue more deeply, it becomes clear that the real villains of this film, Red Guardian and Black Widow set aside, are not in their normal state of mind. The Widows, along with Dreykov's daughter, only fight because they are being manipulated by him. Dreykov, on his turn, is greedy for money and power, but is at the same time weak and coward. Above all, he needs the Black Widow's influence among the Avengers for her to capture the U.S.A. in order for him to conquest his ultimate goal: to take over all the world. Again, for both Russian villains and Russian heroes, there is a great dependence on the U.S.A. But back to the Widows, unable to think for themselves, when they fail at any mission, they are automatically killed by Dreykov, who has no sense of empathy or loyalty in what relates to them.



Figure 4. Antidote (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:47:37).

These villains are prepared for their missions in The Red Room: the training office of Russian female assassins. The Red Room devotes all attention to women because, besides their analogous intelligence, strength and discipline, they have an additional ability: to seduce and entice male soldiers. Selected as babies, through a programme that reads human genetic potential, these are bought by government officials who would not take no for an answer. Natasha, who has escaped the Red Room, once had a real mother who did not want to negotiate her daughter, but had no choice whatsoever. Afterwards, she keeps looking for her baby, annoying Russian officials who eventually decide to kill her and get rid of the problem.

Once they are brought in, the Widows train day and night. During this period, due to how hard and painful such training can be, they are locked in the room and handcuffed to their beds when it is time to sleep, so as for them not to try and scape. When their training is over, only a few of the Widows survive; and these survivors keep on practicing, now as cold and talented combatants. Ruthless, they learn that weak people have no right to live; and these women are, then, deprived of all their kindness and humanity. For their learning how to use firearms, their shooting targets are real people; and if they refuse to kill these hostages their own life gets in the line. Forced to watch children's films, they are brainwashed by the subliminal messages inserted within them by the Russians.

In many occasions, Russians would say that, besides providing the government with almost unbreakable soldiers, the purpose of the programme is to eliminate defects and weaknesses. Describing it as a sort of social evolution, it is evident that, here, there is a parallel being established between the Red Room and the German Nazi experience. One of the many myths invented and reproduced after the emergence of left-wing revolutions is that socialist and fascist experiences have all in common: especially in ideological terms. The Red Room (Figure 5) is a laboratory similar to a Nazi German one; however, trying to create a stronger human race has never been part of the communist agenda, but, for this film, fascism and communism are analogous.

The only historical truth to this moment of the film, if one could say so, is that women have indeed played a much more significant role among Russian soldiers than in the case of U.S.A. soldiers. This is so for, during the U.S.S.R. revolution, different from what usually happens in most Western capitalist countries, women have been given incentive to enter the military. Curiously, in the gender arena, then, it would be right to affirm that communist enterprises have been more progressive than capitalist ones. One of the greatest

evidences of that is the case of Lyudmila Mikhailovna Pavlichenko (1916-1974), the most successful sniper in recorded history. Lyudmila, nicknamed 'Lady Death', served among the two thousand Soviet women snipers. Moreover, she was one of the most important propagandists for the Red Army; and, after she was released from the field, Lyudmila trained snipers for combat.



Figure 5. Red Room (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:41:44).

For a little time, Lyudmila Pavlichenko was married, and gave birth to Rostislav Pavlichenko, who died in 2007. Like many other Soviet women soldiers, Lyudmila has chosen to have a family, then to go through a divorce, to go to war, to address speeches defending the U.S.S.R., and to be a sniper, among many other choices consciously taken by her and then granted by her government. For the master narrative about communist lack of freedom, choice, etc., this detail, however, could never be tolerated. Thus, back to *Black Widow* (Feige & Shortland, 2021), when the Widows finish their training, they go through what is called a graduation ceremony: in a nutshell a ritual when women are sterilised, as to make them more effective soldiers and less amenable to become unavailable for the mission. Unlike Lyudmila, the Widows have no right to get married: nothing should come in the way of their mission – their families are the U.S.S.R. needs and objectives.

In the two former scenes, as in many other moments of the film, the colour red is highlighted, and by no means by chance. When they see themselves freed from Dreykov's control, the Widows have no idea what they are going to do. It is difficult not to see the resemblance in what concerns the neoliberal picture regarding communism. Manipulated, all dressed equally, with no ability to think for themselves, cruel and robotic, the Widows are a metaphor for the communist society, while those who are free from this structure are a symbol of capitalist democracy. What nourishes this oppositions, therefore, are "[...] the ambitions of both the United States and the Soviet Union to lead the world" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 33). Dreykov is the cruel leader who wants to control the whole planet as a dictator, forcing everyone to do as he say, the way he says it. He is, thus, another symbol of U.S.S.R. revolution in the eyes of U.S.A.: the greatest expression of the Red Scare. "The Red Scare influenced public opinion regarding the Soviet Union and intensified the ideological tensions between capitalism/freedom and communism/oppression" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 33). This opposition pervades Dreykov's discourse, when he tells the Black Widow what his plans for the world are:

DREYKOV: You wouldn't be so glib if you had any notion of the scope of what I've built. I own this world. Me./NATASHA: You seem desperate to impress me./DREYKOV: I don't need to impress you. I don't need to impress anyone. These world leaders, these great men, they answer to me and my widows. Look at them. These girls were trash. They are thrown out into the street. I recycle the trash. And I give them purpose. I give them a life. It's my network of widows that help me control the scales of power. One command, the oil and stock markets crumble. One command, and a quarter of the planet will starve. My widows can start and end wars. They can make and break kings./DREYKOV: You control all of that from here?/NATASHA: And with you, an Avenger under my control, I can finally come out of the shadows using the only natural resource that the world has too much of: Girls/NATASHA: All from that little console? [laughing]/DREYKOV: Oh, you find this amusing? Why are you smiling?/NATASHA: Don't take it personal, but, uh... Thank you for your cooperation. You weren't quite strong enough, so... I'll have to finish it myself./DREYKOV: What are you going to do?/NATASHA: Sever the nerve (Feige & Shortland, 2021, 01:40:38-01:43:54).

Natasha knew that she would not be able to touch Dreykov because of the chemicals he releases unless she severed a nerve in her forehead. To achieve that, she tries provoking Dreykov for him to punch her in the face, but he is far too weak for her plan to be successful. Therefore, at the end of this scene, Natasha herself punches her face against the table. After that, she is finally able to physically assault Dreykov. It is difficult not to grasp the irony in this scene. The greatest villain of the story, this evil and large Russian man, is weaker than one of the few Avengers who has no superpowers – not to mention she is hurt and, of course, the fact she is a woman. Besides that, his questionable speech helps one's feelings that the Black Widow must interfere with his business – another effect of U.S.A. propaganda against Russian autonomy. "Anti-communism serves as main narratological code and defines the nature of the content while connecting it to the broader narratological code, American imperialism" (Vergeti, 2017, p. 49).

As one gets to the end of the film, this content becomes undeniable. Every image, every discourse, and every act contribute to this broader narratological code. Villains are the 'Other', in relation to U.S.A. citizens. According to American exceptionalism, different from everywhere, in the United States there is no manipulation, no control, no one trying to conquer the world. There, people are given choices, they are free, and, above all, they are honest trustworthy citizens. The Russian anti-hero are comic heroes: ex-criminals, liars, deceitful scumbags. Both the Red Guardian and his daughter, the Black Widow, are nothing compared to the real heroes: U.S.A. ones. These are superhuman beings: men that exceed men – the tragic idealisation of the hero. Providing the audience with a lot of action, but a very superficial plot, the film does what most U.S.A. narratives do when bringing Russian characters: it depicts the Soviet nation and people as a caricature. As the story effectively demonstrates, we do not need to be in the Cold War for this to happen. The polarisation survives – and hence this need to arrange for the same stereotypes one has learned to get used to, or even worse: believe in.

Final remarks

The Black Widow (Feige & Shortland, 2021) is the story of a spy and, as such, something is important to be taken into account. "Russian spies were everywhere in the 1950s American media culture such as books, magazines, films, radio, and television, and this prevalence affirmed America's fears of communist subversion" (Kackman, 2005, p. 1). An interesting element here is that U.S.A. spies are never taken into account when these discourses emerge. It is almost as if there were no spies trained by U.S. government, when this is really far from the truth. United States military, thus, is depicted as if it were completely different from any other militaries – the only country that would not put spies within other countries. As a matter of fact, historically, the U.S.A. is known as the greatest spy of the planet. If this were brought in its fictional heroic constructions, nonetheless, its development as an exceptionally moral country would be damaged, along with the very foundation of American exceptionalism.

According to Loy (2001, p. 41), "[...] the notion of exceptionalism, which was connected to America's claims to world leadership, was justified and strengthened by American culture. Western films reinforced and mirrored an important American belief". The U.S.A. is not only the global leader: it is also exceptional, unique, and no one could ever take its place as the protagonist of this story – a story of bringing justice to all citizens of the world. *Black Widow* (Feige & Shortland, 2021), as many other narratives, provides us with one more story about how great U.S.A. is. As such, it helps its inhabitants to feel they have been destined for greatness. In fact, even people who do not live in the U.S.A. learn thereby that this foreign country's destiny is to be great. Wherever you are, you should trust U.S.A., because the country, seemingly, is never thinking only about its own interests. As owners of the globe, U.S. government should thus be given the authority to take care of everyone.

There are many evil tentacles to this idea, which is coherent with other master discourses regarding what is right and what is wrong for the world. "Manifest Destiny – the belief that Americans have a mission to lead the world to better things – was connected to the idea of progress, which was considered unquestionably good" (Loy, 2001, p. 41). Progress, development, competition, the free growth of the capital: and it is like this that the American Dream becomes the dream of everyone. "In the ideological war between the United States and the Soviet Union the concepts of democracy and freedom made Americans feel superior to their opponent" (Loy, 2001, p. 41). Democracy and freedom: what one offers the other must deny. That is, for the American Dream to come true, there must be a nightmare to be avoided: and here is the role played by the Soviets. "The concept of progress opposed the Soviet's totalitarianism and Americans used it as a sign of their superiority over their enemy" (Loy, 2001, p. 41). In the ideological war between who is inferior and who is superior, it is much easier to turn this quarrel into good versus evil. Hence the comparison between U.S.S.R. and Nazi Germany – and thence everything that has been discussed in this study.

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