

Identifying the Thread of Antisemitism:
An Analysis of the Gender Regime and National
Order in *Agent Carter*

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Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Gender Studies

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Budapest, Hungary

2019

Abstract

This thesis examines the question as to how reactionary and conservative politics and ideology are mediated through tropes and discourses of antisemitism in the television show *Agent Carter* (2015-2016). The thesis analyzes the generic and gendered constitutions of the characters and narratives with an interdisciplinary reading. This reading is based on Eve Sedgwick's paranoid epistemology conceptualized in queer literary theory. By being situated in theories of nationalism, feminist cultural studies, genre theory and discourse analysis, this thesis analyzes the way genre, gender, and nationalism in *Agent Carter* hinge on a thread of antisemitism. The thread of antisemitism is the manner through which the reactionary politics and conservative ideology is animated and employed. By interpreting popular media through these critical lenses, reactionary and regressive politics become obvious in a piece of popular culture that promotes itself as feminist and progressive.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference. I further declare that the following word count for this thesis is accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 22108 words

Entire manuscript: 25487 words

Signed _____ Melody Barron

Acknowledgments

Dedicated to the paranoid imperative!

Suffice it to say that I could not have written this thesis without the extraordinary community at CEU that has supported me along the way. I thank you Lore, Marcela, Ain, Lora, Piret, Camila, Adrija, Rosa, Paula, Tamara and the entire cohort and faculty that has been with me throughout this year. Thank you, Sanjay, I could not have written this without your feedback and tutelage.

Thank you, Ray and Danny, for the stickers, the listening ear, care packages, and your love and faith in me. Thank you my Mimsy group, Shir, Hila, Maital, and Smadar, I could not have done it without your support. Thank you, Vera, my steadfast friend, who knew my suffering without pause because I wouldn't stop telling her about it. Thank you, Hadar, your loving-kindness was felt throughout the entire process.

To my online community, I'm glad you enjoyed the gifs.

Thank you to my parents, Linda and Norman, who saw me off to a strange land and who knew I was bound for great things. Thank to my siblings and siblings-in-law Leigh and Ariel, Jade and Rami, Robbie and Tsipy; knowing how proud you are of me is more than I could ask for. To my nieces and nephews (in chronological order), Amos, Shvo, Shaul, Libby, Mishaela, Gabriel, and Michaela – your Gaga made it!

And finally, thank you Zsazsa and Jasmina for mentoring me through this year and for believing in me and my work.

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Introduction

My initial motivation in tackling a reading of *Agent Carter* (Markus & McFeely, 2015) is a love for the text. I am a fan of the comic book genre; I am a decades old fan of female superheroes and I am a believer in the influence that stories have on politics. I came to this thesis with a suspicion regarding *Agent Carter*, agreeing with the critics that suggest that the television show is not as progressive as the text proclaims (Shaw-Williams, 2015). It is this suspicion that motivated me to watch and observe the text more carefully, specifically the manner in which gender is articulated in the characters. Moreover, it motivated me to question the political discourse of the television show and how it corresponded with the current events that occurred outside the fiction.

With this in mind, my research question is: What are the ways in which the discursive politics portrayed in the gender regime of *Agent Carter* are articulated in the characters of the TV series? More specifically, how are the representations of hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, and the national order articulated into a discourse of antisemitism threaded in *Agent Carter* in the contemporary reactionary politics of the USA?

In this thesis, I split the analysis into three major lenses and chapters. The first lens is that of gender and genre; more to the point, the constitution of gender within genre the genres that *Agent Carter* is a part of are specifically that of noir (Kaplan, 1996; Silver & Ursini, 1996), crime fictions (Knight, 2007; Plain, 2001; Scaggs, 2008), Cold War espionage (Corber, 1997; Hepburn, 2005; Seed, 1999), and to a lesser extent, science fiction (Attebery, 2002; Haraway, 2013; Seed, 1999), in order to critically engage with representations of the gender regime and the underlying national order (Goodrum, 2018;

Mosse, 1996; Nagel, 1998). The second lens I focus on is nostalgia and aesthetics as conceptualized by Svetlana Boym (Boym, 2001) and Christine Spengler (Spengler, 2009) and the ironic tension (Hutcheon, 2005) that emerges when analyzed through Eve Sedgwick's paranoid epistemology (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 140). The third lens is tightly connected to the second in the way the national order and American supremacy (Boyarin, Itzkowitz, & Pellegrini, 2003; Corber, 1997; Goodrum, 2018; Sedgwick, 1997) emerges in the text, articulated through the characters, plot, and dialogues represented in the television show in a synthesis of antisemitism (Abrams, 2012; Baron, 2003; Liepach, 2007; Milford, 2017; R. G. Weiner, 2011) that brings all the elements together. The reactionary politics of *Agent Carter* is exposed by the recurring thread of antisemitism that anchors the entire show to its conceptualization of identity, narrative, and world building. The thesis relies on a feminist and queer narratological intervention of the text (Warhol & Lanser, 2015).

As I write this introduction, the global popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is at a peak, concluding a decade of films and television programs that all but took over popular culture. *Agent Carter* came out in 2015, a midway point of the MCU franchise's expansion. The show was greatly anticipated by fandom and other viewers who desired more content relating to the side characters of the MCU, as opposed to the main heroes of the films. Promoted as a piece of progressive and feminist (Iordăchescu, 2016) due to being spearheaded by a female heroine and a spin-off of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011), the television show ended up being short lived, a mere eighteen episodes, focusing on the adventures of Peggy Carter, her allies, and the villains she fights.

I watched the television show as it broadcast, a weekly show and a special event; Peggy Carter was another character in the grand lineage of female spies in pop culture (White, 2007) that I could identify with. As I watched I grew more and more concerned with what I was viewing. At the time the rise of antisemitism throughout the mainstream media was something I was taking note of. In *Agent Carter* I noticed the troubling trends, stereotypes, and coded characters and tropes that I was not expecting to see, so uncritically wielded in a television show that purported to engage feminism and diversity of characters and creators (Mayers, 2016).

In spite of the success of the MCU, there is no scholarship on the television series, *Agent Carter*. In the months that have led up to writing this thesis, I've not managed to find any book chapter, or journal article in any database. There are blogs and reviews, but very little interpretation, if any, of its subtextual antisemitism that can be cited. The reflections on *Agent Carter* have been in fandom studies, transmedia studies, but they are mere mentions, not actual analyses of this short-lived television series. The popular reviews mostly focused on the politics of race and gender in *Agent Carter* (Mayers, 2016; Patterson, 2016), that is, on the surface representation of female characters and characters of colour. The implied politics of a series set in the post-War past (1946-1947) focused more on that which references the present (2015-2016), nods at the comic books movies from which it spun off and the proliferation of fake news which in 2016 began to gain traction as a term in mainstream media. This absence of scholarly interest continues to baffle me as I wrestle with the various themes and roads on which to focus.

Agnet Carter did not reach the same levels of success as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (Whedon, Whedon, & Tancharoen, 2013) Nor did it gain the same kind of prestige that

the Netflix Marvel series *Jessica Jones* (Rosenberg, 2015) seems to have. But that is not the question that arises in my mind as I engage with the textual and visual material of this TV show. It is rather the meaning making of reactionary politics that interests me, as it conveys much about the fictional world of the MCU. The MCU is rooted in the superhero genre in comic books, which themselves are rooted in the Jewish immigrant/diaspora of North America (Royal, 2011; Smith, 2011; R. G. Weiner, 2011). When Captain America punched Hitler in the face on the cover of *Captain America Comics* (1940), it was also the representation of Jewish art opposing the rise of global fascism (Royal, 2011).

In 2011, Captain America re-emerged as a fighter against fascism in the movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011). In that movie, Agent Peggy Carter appeared for the first time on the screen as Captain America's ally and love interest. In 2015, she got the opportunity to shine in her own spin-off show, *Agent Carter*. She is depicted as a "strong female character" (Munford & Waters, 2014) in a genre of fiction (Adams & Savran, 2008; Attebery, 2002; Kaplan, 1996), namely, action, adventure, and espionage with an element of science fiction, that has been traditionally associated with idealized masculinity. The show depicts her trying to pave her way through a masculinist work place setting of the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR), where she has to deal with sexist colleagues. The fictional text of *Agent Carter* is an excessively gendered piece of media which focuses on the gender order through the lenses of nostalgia (Beail & Goren, 2015; Dika, 2003; Hook, 2012; Sprengler, 2009).

To give a brief overview of the television show: Peggy Carter is the protagonist and point of view character for the majority of the episodes of the television show. Season One is set in New York City of 1946, and Season Two is set in Los Angeles of

1947. In Season One Peggy, an English woman who is now working for the SSR, an American covert organization whose task is to make sure American made weapons and inventions don't fall into the wrong hands. This is the plot point that kickstarts Season One. The inventions of one of Peggy's allies, Howard Stark, have been found in the hands of the Soviets. Howard asks Peggy to investigate the allegations and find out the truth as to why this has happened. Howard's real motivation is for Peggy to find a vial of Captain America's blood, a plot device that ends up being pertinent for the analysis of this thesis.

Peggy must investigate undercover in her own place of work, as her overtly sexist colleague Jack Thompson continuously sabotages her, and her disabled colleague Daniel Sousa is interested in her romantically. So Peggy is constantly observed by him, not allowing her to work openly. Aiding her in this investigation is Howard Stark's butler, an Englishman by the name of Edwin Jarvis. Throughout Season One, Peggy is shadowed and mirrored by another female spy, an under-cover Soviet agent who goes by the name Dottie Underwood. It is never revealed what Dottie's real name is, if she even has one. Dottie being a corrupted mirror of Peggy is one of the more overt themes of the relationship between them.

In Season Two the SSR sends Peggy and her allies to Los Angeles to investigate a mysterious murder. It is established that the cause of death was from a substance known as Zero Matter. This substance is being studied by Doctor Jason Wilks, a black man who is eventually used as a scapegoat by the company he works for, Isodyne, when Zero Matter proves to be unstable and destructive. Peggy's investigations into the deaths caused by Zero Matter bring her into contact with Jason Wilks, and Season Two's villain,

Whitney Frost, who wishes to wield the power of Zero Matter for her own gain and personal agenda. When Whitney is accidentally exposed to Zero Matter while she is studying it, she gains supernatural powers that endow abilities that enable her to do more than just be a trophy wife and actress. In this thesis the dynamics between the characters, the plot devices, and the generic and narrative structures of the television show are brought to the foreground, embedding them in the analysis.

Chapter 1: Gender and Genre in *Agent Carter*

1.1 An Intervention in Genre and Gender Conventions in *Agent Carter*

Agent Carter cannot and does not stand alone in the genre of television series. Like many other products of contemporary television, and certainly as part of a franchise of adapted comic books to other media platforms, *Agent Carter* is part of multiple genre genealogies. In this chapter I focus on the specific generic conventions that I recognize as functioning elements in the constitution of gender of *Agent Carter* and see the ways those conventions are indexical of the political order of the non-fictional world. I specifically delve into the conventions and constituting genders found within the genres of crime fiction, film noir, and espionage and intrigue fiction (Hepburn, 2005; Kaplan, 1996; Knight, 2007; Plain, 2001; Scaggs, 2008; Seed, 1999; Silver & Ursini, 1996; White, 2007)

It goes without saying that the different genres of television, of film, of literature, each carry specific conventions of the medium, influencing one another both intertextually (Currie, 1995, p.87) and self-reflexively, referencing each other through the narrative. In terms of genre conventions, *Agent Carter* is a hybrid text that is articulated out of cross- and transmedia genres as a result of being a crime fiction (Knight, 2007), spin-off, an adaptation of a comic book, and, exceptionally for these genre conventions, having a female lead character a.k.a the female superhero (Bercuci, 2016; Curtis & Cardo, 2018; Zaidan, 2015),. *Agent Carter*, as a spin-off, is already an offshoot of an existing fictional world (Boni, 2017; Thon, 2017): the show, *Agent Carter* references its originator movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger* as part of its established world. It also references its own fictional future in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) at large

in so far as *Agent Carter* in itself provides that ‘universe’ a history and also references the past and history as a genre in itself (Rosenstone, 2010, p. 38).

There are implications for writing a past for a world that already has an established present, and at the same time writing its future, which in itself is an established world. The past that the spectator watches in *Agent Carter* is a possible world for the viewer as well as a diegetic construct in relation to the MCU in which its relation to our own non-fictional world may be incidental. The history of our world is both reflected in, and a reference to the fiction (Rosenstone, 2010; Scott, 1991). *Agent Carter* engages with the history in which it is situated with irony and self-awareness. This comes to the fore with props, such as a typewriter that operates through long range radio frequencies and an electro-shock weapon and purely imaginary chemical weapons and compounds that, for the plot and characters, are part and parcel of the genre in which they are situated (Creeber, 2007, p. 20). These props have contemporary equivalencies in use today, stylized in a way that shows the portrayal of a past that has already been constructed through a reliance on the fact that there is a collective history previously put forth by film and television. That is. the post-war 1940s in which the show is set is not history in itself but rather a pastiche of the genres that are set in that time period.

When it comes to genre and gender, there are moments of metafictionality when *Agent Carter* draws attention to its own artifice (Waugh, 1996, p. 2). It deploys irony (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 30) in a similar vein when it comes to nostalgia, and makes the viewers aware that it knows exactly what it is in relation to genre and gender conventions in its period piece setting. The moments of self-awareness in *Agent Carter* occur when the show refers to itself as a period piece set in the 1940s, which I expand upon in the

analysis in this chapter. That is to say, *Agent Carter* is made to index is moments of subverting the generic conventions. In this chapter I intervene in these subversions and articulate why *Agent Carter* in fact reinforces and conserves what it seeks to subvert.¹

Series One attempts to critique its own regression through a self-referential commodification of US history in the form of the radio show, *The Captain America Adventure Program* (Russo, 2015). It is this type of self-referentiality that commits to metatextual interventions (Waugh, 1996, p. 54) along with the in-jokes and intertextual references to characters and films that are part of the MCU. The world building and narrative proliferation (Boni, 2017, p. 34) of *Agent Carter* constitutes the fictional future the MCU, the political consequences of which I get into in Chapter 2.

Agent Carter relies on its own existence as a spin-off to be a coherent line of references related to the broader MCU franchise and narrative (Boni, 2017, pp. 164–165) on which the metafictional moments land. Those metafictional moments address the show's placement within its generic world - noir, Cold War espionage thriller, comic book adaptation - and the gender conventions that are constituted through those generic conventions. In this chapter I analyze these genre and gender conventions, explore what the television show does with the genres that make up the show's underlying discourses which emerge along with the narrative. I will explore how gender is articulated and the consequences of these gender regimes in relation to the question of this thesis. That is, the way antisemitic rhetoric, tropes, figurations thread the anchor of the discursive

¹ One show that part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe that use conventions of genre and subvert (Bercuci, 2016, pp. 264–265) them in a more convincing way is *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) which was distributed on Netflix. More can be said about the platform on which each show was initially broadcast in order to discuss the differences, among them the period setting of *Agent Carter* as opposed to the contemporary setting of *Jessica Jones*. I think more comparative research can be done regarding these two female comic book heroines that are constituted within the noir genres.

articulations of gender within genres and their political consequences of their intersection.

When discussing genres and genre conventions as lenses of analysis I rely on Tzvetan Todorov's (Todorov, 1995) and Thomas Pavel's (Pavel, 2003) conceptualization of genres as constitutive and contingent on their historical contexts and the medium in which they are articulated. That is, the conventions of genres are always-already in intervention- relying on an intertextual and self-referential existence for their own conventions. If a piece of text, in the broad sense, goes against the genre, that is possible because it relies on the conventions of that genre to articulate itself (Todorov, 1995, p. 14). The conventions of the genre in question, whatever genre it may be, are in place and emerge from a historically contingent moment (Todorov, 1995, p. 15). Moreover, the form of the genre informs the content of the genre (Todorov, 1995, p. 18) and it is the form of the genre that constitutes the formations of gender within the genres. The focus of this analysis is on the ways the genre changes in the two seasons of *Agent Carter* and how those changes in turn constitute the gendering of the characters. The characters I discuss in the analysis are: Peggy Carter, Dottie Underwood, Howard Stark, Edwin Jarvis, Ana Jarvis, Jack Thompson, Jason Wilks, Daniel Sousa, Calvin Chadwick and Whitney Frost.

In order to understand the gendering of Peggy Carter, the protagonist, and Dottie Underwood, Peggy's mirror antagonist, I turn to the scholarship that has explored the genre through the possibilities of the female superhero (Bercuci, 2016; Curtis & Cardo, 2018; O'Reilly, 2005; Tigges, 2017) and specifically, the character of the woman spy (Jenkins, 2007; White, 2007), an archetype of feminine heroism across fictional media. In

my reading, the realization of the female superhero in the context of *Agent Carter*, marks the show as a postfeminist articulation of the conventions. I shall show that *Agent Carter* continues the legacy of portraying women as figurations of “popular feminism” on television (Munford & Waters, 2014; Waters, 2011), and indeed being an antagonist to feminist politics (Waters, 2011, p. 28). Put simply, the gender as constituted through the genre conventions of *Agent Carter* undermines the feminist political message the television show claims to convey (Shaw-Williams, 2015). In this regard my ultimate concern is to explore what the political consequences of these articulations do in the world of *Agent Carter* itself and the broader franchise world of the MCU. The constructed story worlds of *Agent Carter*’s (Jan-Noël Thon 2017, 291) results in particular forms of engendering characters that vary with the representational conventions of the genres and remain well within these representational conventions and constitutes a missed opportunity of a feminist superwoman character. *Agent Carter* was proclaimed to be a feminist show from the outset by some (Iordăchescu, 2016), but the show does not live up to its own proclamations.

1.2 Missed Opportunities in Rearticulating Genre Conventions in *Agent Carter*

Series One of *Agent Carter* is situated within the 1940s hard-boiled noir genre, interspersed with elements of the Soviet espionage thriller. The location of the events therefore in post-war New York City is meant to convey a gritty city life that is part and parcel of the two genres. Peggy Carter, a singular and Strong Female Character (McDougall, 2013; Tigges, 2017) is the protagonist within a masculinist genre. I analyze this period setting of *Agent Carter* in the 1940s to explore the missed opportunity for

rewriting the masculinist tradition through the concept of nostalgia as articulated by Svetlana Boym (Boym, 2001) and Christine Sprengler (Sprengler, 2009).

The alleged feminist intervention continues in Season Two of *Agent Carter* where the espionage elements take a back seat, though the spy-vs-spy conflict between Peggy Carter and Dottie Underwood continues as a result of the generic subtext that exists within espionage. The setting in the second series is 1940s Los Angeles, more specifically Hollywood, providing the opportunity for the intersection of politics and entertainment in the text itself. In Season Two a certain sexual tension emerges between the two women (White, 2007, p. 45). On the surface a soap operatic heterosexual romantic dilemma takes place (Haase, 2004, p. 57): Who will Peggy Carter choose: Daniel Sousa, one of Peggy's colleagues from within the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR), who happens to be a disabled war veteran or Jason Wilkes, a scientist who gets compromised by Zero Matter, who happens to be black? The romantic entanglement is a constitution of hegemonic gendered sexuality within the genre that matters in this context (Warhol & Lanser, 2015, p. 43). But the marvelous (Todorov, 1995, p. 42) science-fiction elements come to the fore along with more metafictional self-awareness, generic self-referentials and more references to the non-fictional reality (Waugh, 1996, pp. 48–49), along with the artifice of the television show itself.

A telling example of this metafictional self-awareness and generic self-reference occurs in the first episode of Season Two, *The Lady in the Lake* (Trilling, 2016), when Peggy investigates the murder of a young woman. The murder is a reference to the

unresolved real world 1947 case of Elizabeth Short, a.k.a. the Black Dahlia.² The reference is used in the episode to solidify the Hollywood connection. In the episode husband and wife, Senate Candidate Calvin Chadwick and actress Whitney Frost (Figure 1), are introduced as a power couple, vying for positions of influence in politics and entertainment. They are also responsible for the murder, arranged to cover up Chadwick's infidelity while he campaigns. In the interaction between Chadwick & Frost and Peggy & Jarvis below, the intersection of politics and entertainment is brought to the fore. The conversation takes place when Peggy and Jarvis confront the couple in an attempt to find evidence about the murder:

Jarvis: That is Calvin Chadwick. Oh, and his wife, Whitney Frost.

Carter: Who?

Jarvis: Whitney Frost, star of "the 'F' Stands for Freedom."

Carter: She doesn't look familiar.

Jarvis: Well, surely, you've seen "Tales of Suspense."

Carter: I'm not one for the cinema.

Jarvis: What do you do for relaxation? Assemble rifles?

Carter: I trust you to distract her with your flattery.

Jarvis: Aside from "Danger," my middle name is "Charm." ... Excuse me. Miss Frost? Edwin Jarvis. Head of production, Stark Pictures.

Frost: Oh. Charmed.

Jarvis: Might I have a word?

Carter: [American accent] Mr. Chadwick, I am one of your biggest advocates for Senate.

Chadwick: What a delight to see such an attractive young woman like yourself interested in politics.

Carter: If you don't beat that ugly old representative Anderson, California is gonna go to hell in hand basket. [Laughs]

² The case of the Black Dahlia has been adapted into a film, *The Black Dahlia* (De Palma, 2006) (Summers, 2006) and continues to haunt popular culture noir (Farrimond, 2013; Hoffman, 2003; Reppetto, 2018).

Chadwick: I think I need you on my campaign committee. (Trilling, 2016)

As demonstrated in the quote, one of the most frustrating aspects of watching *Agent Carter* is the aspect of building its fictional world and the gendering of the characters in it. The scene also contains a metafictional reference to *Agent Carter*'s genre. Jarvis says to Whitney: "This would be a... A spy picture. No, you'd play a female agent. Tough as nails." – genre and gender operate and constitute each other. Including the lack of a love interest for Peggy, an aspect the show remarks upon in the metafiction moment: Whitney Frost asks, "So, she, uh, doesn't have a love interest?" And Jarvis replies, "[...] Um, uh... we haven't found *the right actor* yet." (emphasis mine) and throughout the narrative, which I discuss earlier in the chapter with regard to the heterosexual constitution of Peggy and *Agent Carter* as a whole.

As I said above, the television series *Agent Carter* relies on the genres of historical fiction, the superhero genre, science fiction, noir, and crime drama as well as the Cold War espionage thriller (Hepburn, 2005; Knight, 2007; Scaggs, 2008; Silver & Ursini, 1996). The way the characters are gendered relies on the conventions of the genre that constitutes them, both linguistically and visually.

If there is to be any kind of feminist intervention in the generic conventions that are articulated in *Agent Carter*, it cannot rely on the heroine, Peggy Carter, mostly because of the generic conventions of noir and espionage thrillers. Within the genres of noir and espionage conventionally comes a destabilizing element, a femme fatale: Dottie Underwood in Season One and Whitney Frost in Season Two.



Figure 1 Politics and Entertainment Power Couple, Chadwick and Frost. From S2E1 The Lady in the Lake (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

According to the conventions of the two genres, the protagonist, whether hero, anti-hero, or heroine, is the one whose task is to return the world to its order. Hence Peggy's task cannot be to subvert but to uphold the national order. Resolving the conflict that threatens this world must eventually bring back the stability of the gender regime and national order. The change that emerges in the wake of the conflict is in the hero's understanding, in this case, heroine, that she does not stand alone but has her allies, aligned with protecting the nation, to help her. Another generic convention that shapes the world of *Agent Carter* comes from the iteration of fairy tale elements that, in the sense of Todorov's categories, are not considered fantastic within the world building of *Agent Carter* but rather marvelous (Todorov, 1995, p. 33). The fairy tale elements, rearticulated as metaphors within the genre that constitutes Agent Carter, are part of the law and order of the world we read, view, and observe and which Peggy accepts when she investigates

these elements. The narratives of the genres along with their genders come along in the rearticulation of fairy tales and their incorporation into *Agent Carter*, of which there is an inevitability that the female heroine who operates in service of the national order must defeat the female villain who disrupts the national order, along with the gender order.

The world of the television show contains archetypes and stereotypes that are used for its own particular narrative purposes. The mirror, one of these archetypes, is both a prop and metaphor in the visual world of *Agent Carter*. Moreover, the mirror in the context of *Agent Carter* holds the gaze of femininity internalized as a narrative of its self,³ Peggy is not only the protagonist and the female superhero, she is also mirrored by her antagonist, the femme fatale figure of Dottie Underwood (Creed, 2007; Kaplan, 1996). The two of them are the women who use their power in contention to the status quo, the national order of what is the face of the threat of infiltration (Nagel, 1998). The mirror, both conceptually and as an object is a recurring theme and metaphor in *Agent Carter*, invoking and evoking, the place of otherness as articulated by Gabriele Schwab (Schwab, 1996, pp. ix–x).

In the first episode of Season One, *Now is Not the End* (D’Esposito, 2015) Peggy dresses in front of a mirror, putting on stockings, and the mis-en-scene provides us with more than just Peggy showing us her leg. There is an invitation to look and an invitation to gaze, in the way Laura Mulvey conceptualized the male gaze (Munford & Waters, 2014, p. 52) and that gaze is hovering behind our eyes, the framing of Peggy as to-be-looked-at is reiterated by the fact that the mirror reflects her in the scene (Figure 2). The mirror

³ Though I am not doing a Lacanian reading of the mirror and the self per se, there is certainly an invitation to do so, considering how often the mirror is used to show Peggy Carter, Dottie Underwood, and Whitney Frost as gazing at themselves and seeing another self in the reflection.

returns in the Season One episode *The Iron Ceiling* (Leto, 2015) when Dottie Underwood enters Peggy's apartment to spy on her. In the scene Dottie rifles through Peggy's makeup, jewelry, and other belongings until eventually she looks in the mirror on Peggy's dresser and speaks in the same manner that Peggy does, i.e. an English accent, saying: "Hello, I'm Peggy Carter" (Leto, 2015), transforming into Peggy's corrupted mirror, which I analyze further in this chapter. With regard to Whitney Frost, the mirror is a constant image that corresponds with her corruption. Frost's face becomes more and more marred as she grows in power, which is shown throughout Season Two but specifically *Life of the Party* (Zisk, 2016) and *Monsters* (Hüseyin, 2016).



Figure 2 Peggy's donning femininity in front of a mirror. From S1E1 *Now Is Not the End* (2015) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

The other archetype is that of the villain ,a key element of the continuous sense of insidiousness that initially came across to me when I watched the television show for the first time. This corresponds with my position as a paranoid reader (Sedgwick, 2005) and is a major organizing principle as the narrative unfolds. This insidiousness emerges to

characterize the antagonists and villains (Creed, 2007; Haase, 2004; Schwab, 1996) portraying the different modes of villainy, particularly the form of feminine villains. In the first series the villain of the show, Dottie Underwood, comes from the outside and infiltrates the fictional world (Seed, 1999). In Series Two we come to learn that villainy has always been entwined with the national order. The villain here is the cabal of white men who manipulate politics, industry, and culture, called the Arena Club a.k.a. Council of Nine and introduced in Season Two episode *Better Angels* (Platt, 2016). But because it is the two femme fatales, Dottie Underwood, the Soviet-cum-stateless spy and Whitney Frost, the scientist-cum-actress, who operate against the conspiratorial cabal that holds the true power of the state and the nation, their femininity is constructed as monstrous and murderous. Due to the shift in location (from New York to Hollywood) and tone in the show (from gritty city espionage to falsely glamorous suburban noir) from Series One to Series Two, the danger threatening the national order that Peggy, the super woman hero is to defend, also shift: While the nation needs to be defended against infiltrators from the outside in Series One, in Series Two it must be defended rather from conspirators from the inside and simultaneously saving the gender order from destabilization.

The fear of Soviet infiltration into the United States is a major theme in *Agent Carter*. Dottie Underwood, the femme fatale, is the Soviet spy who doesn't have an accent, who has assimilated herself into American society seamlessly in ways Peggy, ironically, has not managed to achieve due to her insistence on being equal to men in a time and place which deem that unacceptable. Both Peggy and Dottie work undercover, though Peggy within her own organization, in order to promote its agenda which, she

believes, is misappropriated by its sexism; while Dottie embodies the American ideas but on behalf of the Soviet authoritarianism that uses women against Americans who constantly underestimate them. Though Peggy and Dottie use similar tactics to achieve their goals, such as disguises and false identities, like in the episodes *Now Is not the End* and *Sinn to Err* (D'Esposito, 2015; Williams, 2015), respectively; with Dottie the narrative indicates that these tactics make her more dangerous than Peggy. This juxtaposition of the Liberal West against the Soviet East is as old as the Cold War itself and typified within the science fiction genre referenced in *Agent Carter*. The women mirror each other in the way the Western bloc mirrored the Eastern bloc during the time of the Cold War, metaphorically embodying the values of each bloc, maintaining the heroism of the West and the villainy of the East and the fear of infiltration that Dottie symbolizes, specifically in Season One. These mirroring narratives are not new (Seed, 1999, p. 94) and were and remain a mainstay in the American imagination regarding the Soviet bloc.

Dottie, within the context of *Agent Carter*, due to its pastiche and self-awareness regarding what it is presenting, is not shown, however, as a pure femme fatale monster. Both Peggy and Dottie have to work in subterfuge in a masculine world that constantly underestimates them. There is a suggestion in the subtext that the genre allows an alternative connection between the two women. The story of this world of stylized espionage positions these women as mirrored enemies, and creates a contingency of solidarity which strings these two women spies together (Haraway, 2013; White, 2007). In the Season Two episode *Life of the Party* (Zisk, 2016) Peggy is momentarily out of commission and she asks Dottie for help to infiltrate the villainous cabal's headquarters.

It is a point when Dottie's elements of femme fatale are appropriated in the name of the greater cause of the national order that Peggy seeks to uphold and defend, and Dottie seeks to destroy. Dottie remains loyal to her own Soviet ideology even while being in a position of statelessness. She says in her own words, "The decadence in this place is truly repulsive." (Zisk, 2016).

As I have shown in the above section, *Agent Carter* works together many genres. From the cracks of the noir, espionage, historical fiction, and science fiction, there is an opportunity for *Agent Carter* to produce various feminist and queered interventions and subvert the genre expectations. These interventions, however, remain subtextual at best and missed opportunities at worst. *Agent Carter* remains a conservative articulation of the various genres that it brings together and the show itself remains trapped within the conventions of the broader story world from which it emerged. In the following section I shall explore that in accordance with the plot, the genderings of the characters remain equally trapped in the conventions of the genres.

1.3 The Conventions of Gender in *Agent Carter*

The gender conventions as constituted through the genre conventions are an inherent part of the building of the fictional world. It is those conventions that at the same time can be analyzed to see if they are mobilizing a point of departure from the idea that a fictional world must be mimetic. That is, to see if the given art work goes beyond the divide that the narrative is referential to our non-fictional world for us to comprehend it, versus the assumption that the texts and characters which create and inhabit the fictional operate independently of the real world (Pavel, 1986, p. 62). The world of the series must be

sufficiently accessible for the viewer to be able to comprehend it: hence the self-referencing in the series may allow for the viewer to be familiar with the world and narrative before the characters.

The world of *Agent Carter* relies on an already established fictional world as discussed previously through Thon (Thon, 2017). The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is the originator and, as such, *Agent Carter* references its own future in character call backs, in-jokes, and other intertextual technologies. The past is retrospective, the future is set, and a very specific future for that world at that, even if the viewer is not familiar with the MCU. For an audience familiar with the transmedia world of the MCU, these references carry extra meaning; for an audience not in the know of these references, these moments lack the nuance necessary to get the joke.

The television series references the radio show, *The Captain America Adventure Program*, which was introduced in episode *Bridge and Tunnel* (Russo, 2015) implicating Peggy's own fictional past, the events of *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The intertextual association, in a fictionalized manner, creates a fiction within a fiction which the viewer – if familiar with the film – along with Carter, recognizes as ironic. However, Peggy's agency is compromised with the radio show, as her story within the story is taken away from her, manipulated and distorted in the Season One episodes *Bridge and Tunnel* (Russo, 2015) and *Valediction* (Misiano, 2015).. Throughout Season One she is treated as though she is invisible in the office environment, her wartime exploits are similarly minimized until her personal connections are needed for a military expedition, seen in episode *The Iron Ceiling* (Leto, 2015). Peggy is constantly misrepresented both in the popular culture of the world and the work culture in which she must engage, her true

abilities coming forth only through her covert operation within a covert operation. This subterfuge counterpoints and parallels her with the infiltrator Dottie Underwood, the Soviet agent introduced in Season One whose own past we glimpse at, shifting the point of view momentarily in order for the viewer to know the truth about Underwood before Carter, enhancing the irony and danger that characterize her in the episode *The Iron Ceiling* (Leto, 2015).

Though at times *Agent Carter* relies on the intertextual aspects of its world building, there is a greater reliance on the generic intertextuality of the show. The two types are intertwined in an attempt to make the television show stand alone, but doesn't quite manage, especially in Series One, which not only has flashbacks to the film that originally introduced Agent Peggy Carter and other characters who appeared in *Captain America: The First Avenger* and which feature in *Agent Carter*. In Season Two not only is there a thematic break with that particular aspect of intertextuality and referential play, but there is also a shift in the generic scheme that operates within the show and so with the genderings.

Season One based its generic performance on film noir and Cold War espionage thriller. Season Two goes more metaphorical and invokes aspects of reimagined fairy tales and conspiracy theory thrillers, which fall under the noir genre, but the Cold War espionage aspect is less an overarching theme and more an in world plot device, as opposed to an actual part of the nationalist discourse. The gendered nationalist discourse in Season Two shifts away from sexism in the work place to sexism in representation in Hollywood. In both series hegemonic masculinity is a stand in for the nationalist order, but the gendering of femininity and masculinity operates differently in the two seasons.

In Season Two the Soviet Femme Fatale, Dottie Underwood, is now stateless as she is abandoned by the villains of Season One. Through her, the new villains are implicated, they are the conspiratorial cabal foreshadowed in Season One. The discourse of the national order shifts gears in Season Two and what is explicitly emphasized at stake is the gender regime. The two different series provide a swinging pendulum of values that operate similarly but are brought into different focuses. In Season One the national order and the external “Other” is the major enemy, in Season Two, the internal enemies of the gender regime in the context of the grit of noir New York and glamour of noir Los Angeles, respectively.

It is through the accessibility and collective history of historical genre television and film and their generic conventions (Bishop, 2018, p. 283) that the familiarity of the narratives of a post-war world in the form of the thriller and noir detective story that provides a blue print and scheme through which the gender conventions and relations are brought into play in the context of *Agent Carter*. However, the alleged attempt at subverting our genre expectations coalesces in a masculinist repetition of the reactionary gender politics that are the underlying feature of the series.

An element of the world building is the radio show I mention above: *Agent Carter* has its own popular culture, its own models of representation that are meant to be an ironic contradiction to the actual representation of Peggy Carter and the other characters. The show goes on to undermine itself through differently gendered characters and plot. Within the conventions of the genre of the Cold War spy thriller (Seed, 1999), we have an infiltrating femme fatale, Dottie Underwood, weaponized in Soviet Russia. For both Peggy and Dottie, questions of agency arise regarding the story of these two women’s

lives as they are placed head to head on opposing sides of a polarized political agenda. The political agenda works to make post-war America both accessible due to the necessary flattening of historical events and fantastic thanks to it being additionally situated within a world in which superheroes are real and anachronisms are technological marvels. The second is the agency of the characters within the world (Punday, 2003, p. 86), as they operate within the constraints of the world building.

From Peggy Carter's iconic red hat (Figure 3) to Jack Thompson's suspenders and shoulder holsters, to Howard Stark's moustache and the habitual red lipped and peroxide blonde propped by his side. These are semiotics and conventions of gender that are constituted by the genres in which they belong (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2010, p. 295). This includes the way Dottie Underwood's emphasized femininity is used to conceal her Soviet allegiance and military training and the fact that everyone on the Council of Nine, the evil cabal in true control of the nation, are all white haired, old white men. The man with the least power is the youngest of them and women are not allowed to be members of this cabal, which I expand upon in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.



Figure 3 Peggy's emphasized femininity. From S1E1 Now Is Not the End (2015) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

In Season One, it is through Peggy's emphasized femininity that the hegemony of the maleness of her colleagues in the SSR is maintained (Connell, 1987). Peggy's colleague, Jack Thompson, is the ultimate example of hegemonic masculinity, and he along with other colleagues are the investigative covert organization for securing the American national order (Connell, 1987; Nagel, 1998). Peggy's emphasized femininity is accompanied by the subordinate masculinity of her ally, Howard Stark (Figure 4), who is coded as both queer and Jewish (Sedgwick, 2005), but is portrayed as a womanizer: it results in an ambiguity that is enough to maintain a front that may present him as part of the hegemonic order into which he has conditionally assimilated (Connell, 1987).



Figure 4 Howard Stark, in a newsreel, ambiguously Jewish and queer. From S1E1 *Now Is Not the End* (2015) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

Along with the utterances of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity within the national order, Peggy's antagonist, Dottie Underwood, is an example of the way the dialogue of emphasized femininity articulates her infiltration into the national order. When Dottie is silent, her skills as the deadly covert Soviet Femme Fatale emerge (Doane, 1991), while her dialogue keeps her concealed in plain sight. This is in comparison to Peggy whose words have power within the structure of the show. One of the recurring utterances that reel Peggy into the national order through the hegemonic power of her male colleagues is "Do as Peggy says!". This phrase occurs in Season One in *The Iron Ceiling* (Leto, 2015) when she and her military friends go behind enemy lines. It also occurs during a scene in the final episode of Season Two, *Hollywood Ending* (Getzinger, 2016), when she and her colleagues make their dramatic attempt at saving the world from Whitney Frost. The way Dottie operates is through her infiltration skill set, her emphasized femininity that she operationalizes as a femme fatale, concealing her true

deadly abilities. In contrast Peggy is constantly showing her skills, constantly showing her expertise, to no avail until push comes to shove and due to Peggy's position as protagonist, she must save the day.

Peggy and Dottie are both presented within the conventions of a femme fatale character in order to achieve the ends on their mission. But since Carter is the point of view character, we know she is only donning a femme fatale costume, whereas Underwood is a femme fatale proper in line with noir and spy thriller genre conventions. Due to Underwood's position as an infiltrator and assassin, as opposed to a patriotic federal agent like Carter, the narrative places Carter as morally superior, justifying her actions, whereas Underwood remains morally bankrupt, as is shown in the Season One episode *Valediction* (Misiano, 2015) and the Season Two episode *The Lady in the Lake* (Trilling, 2016).

The other female character, Edwin Jarvis' wife, Ana, is entirely disembodied throughout Season One of *Agent Carter*, she is only a voice and a plot device for Edwin Jarvis's act of treason during the Second World War (Winant, 2015), which he committed in order to save her from certain death due to her being Jewish. In Season Two, she is presented as a bubbly and hyper-feminine companion to Edwin Jarvis' stereotypically British stiff upper lip (Figure 5). Their personalities and visual comportments are in contrast. Jarvis is tall and wears neutral greys, Ana is a short redhead often wearing bright greens and reds and is presented for comedic effect and constitutes a reiteration of heteronormative domestic bliss (Waters, 2011, p. 18). The bliss between them is related to a futurity that ends up being taken away, upon which I elaborate in Chapter 3.



Figure 5 Ana and Edwin Jarvis. From S2E7 *Monsters* (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

The character of Howard Stark, who during the war was considered the greatest patriot, becomes Public Enemy Number One with the changing times (D'Esposito, 2015). From the very first moments of the opening episode of *Agent Carter* (ibid), Stark is accused of selling weapons to Russia, but is actually being framed by the Soviets who seek to undermine America. The blacklisting of Americans suspected of being communists was utilized often (Litvak, 2009) and one didn't need Soviet intervention. But the world in *Agent Carter* requires this Soviet intervention for two reasons. One, due to the generic conventions of the noir, spy thriller, which are placed in a science fiction context, constitute a pulp anachronism, creating a contrived causality between Soviet influence and the positioning of Stark as a traitor, manufacturing scenarios in which Peggy Carter must don costumes which amp up her already emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987). Two, in order to more easily redeem Howard Stark from his supposed treason and vilify the Soviet operative, Dottie Underwood, bringing forth a femme fatale

character and element (Doane, 1991), who is there to be a morally corrupt mirror of Peggy Carter (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Dottie as Peggy's corrupted mirror. From S2E1 The Lady in the Lake (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

This moral bankruptcy is brought back with Whitney Frost, whose monstrosity is established by her incorporation of Zero Matter into her own body, marring her face and becoming disfigured, Whitney become more and more powerful, a literal femme fatale (Figure 7). She destroys a portion of the cabal of old white men, the old guard of national power, including her husband. This marks her as the destabilizing force within the genre and her gendering is part and parcel of this attack on the national order.



Figure 7 Whitney Frost before she kills the room full of men. From S2E6 Life of the Party (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

Peggy Carter is an English woman in post-war America and situated within an all-male workplace that marginalizes her both for her gender and nationality, in order to emphasize the reactionary gender politics and xenophobia that are supposedly inherent to the 1940s. These elements, her gender and her nationality, are sub-textually used in the plot in order to cast her as a traitor, a common trope in the espionage genre (Foucault, 1984, p. 5; Hepburn, 2005, p. 86). In the show, both Peggy and Edwin Jarvis, the only overtly foreign character on the side of good (all other foreign characters are cast as villains) according to the narrative, are cast as traitors at a certain point, due to the work they must do in an underhanded way specifically because they are marginalized in their work. By their gender (Peggy) and nationality (Peggy and Jarvis). But their foreignness in the United States is never brought up until it is used as a threat to deport them, unlike Carter's gender which is a constant Othering she must contend with.

The gender conventions within *Agent Carter* remain tied to the genre with little to no feminist or queer intervention. The television tells us that there is, but the manifestation and articulation of the characters in their gendering remain well within the conventions of the genres that constitute them. There is irony and self-awareness that is deployed much in the same way that it is when it comes to the genre conventions as discussed in the previous section of this chapter. But Peggy's emphasized femininity and her allegiance to the nation conflicts with the monstrous femininity of Dottie Underwood, the infiltrator and mirror image of Peggy. Whitney Frost's monstrosity is overt and an incorporation of the fairy tale element to move the narrative of Season Two. The male characters remain as still and stereotypical throughout the narrative of the show, some articulating hegemonic masculinity and other subordinate, each discursively coding different aspects of the gender regime and national order that *Agent Carter* portrays.

The positioning of *Agent Carter* within the existing literature of genre and gender enables the visibility of how the gender of the hero is constituted within the genres of noir, crime, and espionage. By showing where and how Agent Carter intervenes, or more to the point, doesn't intervene in the generic conventions, the exposure of the gender regime and the discursive relationship to the national order is clarified. In Chapter 2 I explore further the gendered articulation using the concept of nostalgia and irony in order to discuss the nationalist agenda that lies under the discursive surface of the television show. The gender and genre conventions of the show hold within them a repressive code which is pieced together with an implied antisemitic discourse that I will expose and bring to the fore by intervening with a paranoid reading of the text.

Chapter 2: Nostalgia and Irony in *Agent Carter*

2.1 Recognizing and Reading the Political Agenda in the Text

After situating *Agent Carter* within the lineage of the genres that constitute the gender of the characters, i.e. the genres of crime, noir, and espionage and intrigue (Hepburn, 2005, 2005; Kaplan, 1996; Knight, 2007; Plain, 2001; Scaggs, 2008; Seed, 1999; Silver & Ursini, 1996; White, 2007), I now situate myself and my reading of *Agent Carter* within specific theoretical frameworks. The first thing I must do is confess to being a paranoid reader, in the way that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick warned about (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 5). But as I watched *Agent Carter* in the comfort of my living room five years ago on its first broadcast, I couldn't help but notice an issue that had haunted me. As I watched the television show, the various tropes and stereotypes in the popular and cultural representation of Jewishness used in ways that appeared insidious, invidious, and outright sinister. This is not to say that *Agent Carter* is the only cultural product that deploys these tropes (Baron, 2011; Karp, 2011; Moisan, 2005) and within the superhero genre and Marvel comic products in particular. The place of Jews in the superhero genre is always somewhat ambiguous, often the Jewish identity of characters is implicated only in the figure of a purportedly more universal metaphor, that of the mutants (Abrams, 2012; Baron, 2003; Darowski, 2014).

Though there is a long history of Jewish representation in the culture, both by Jewish creators and non-Jewish creators (Abrams, 2012; Baron, 2011; Goldsmith, 2005; Greenblatt, 1990; Schrank, 2007; Schreier, 2016), the kind of representation I am discussing and identifying is subtextual. It emerges through codifications that are little more than a dogwhistle (Goodin & Saward, 2005), they can only be seen if you know

what you are looking for (Sedgwick, 1997). By reading *Agent Carter* through Sedgwick's paranoid epistemology I identify many of these dogwhistles that are similarly played out in and by a homosexual panic in our culture. Though Sedgwick gives warning regarding putting faith in paranoia as a means of exposure, i.e. the creation of knowledge vis- a- vis exposure (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 138), in the similar way that Joan Scott questions experience as a category of historical evidence (Scott, 1991), my faith is not in exposure per se, but rather in using an analysis that operates in line with the text itself. As I established in Chapter 1, the genres that *Agent Carter* is situated in rest on the notion that there is conspiracy afoot. I caveat that by saying that I do not believe that the dogwhistles I identify and expose were placed there by the writers on purpose, but rather that they emerge through a violence that is part of cultural production of texts (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 140). By making them visible in *Agent Carter*, the political message of the television show emerges and the discourse of gender and the national order appear, undermining *Agent Carter's* proclamations of being politically feminist and progressive (Patterson, 2016).

Homosexual panic and antisemitism are often constituted similarly and by appropriating the method of reading panic and paranoia into the text, the articulation of queerness and Jewishness can be determined and analyzed through Sedgwick's particular sensitivity to both and the epistemological notion that the two identity categories have an alliance and analogical relationship (Jakobsen, 2003). I find reading antisemitism through the lens of queer theory, namely Sedgwick's paranoid reading, the most productive for exposing discourses of antisemitism that hide under the surface of the visible textual and visual representations of the characters and the narratives themselves. In so far as the

characters discursively embody the gender regime, as I discussed in the previous chapter regarding genre and gender, I am interested in who is or can be included in the narrative national order (Corber, 1997; Hepburn, 2005; Mosse, 1996; Sedgwick, 2005).

This is not to say that pointing out the dogwhistles and the nationalist discourses cannot, in themselves, create a dangerous system of interpretation, enabling a paranoid and panicked combing of narratives, discourses, and subtexts, finding what one already expects to be there, which Sedgwick labels “the hermeneutics of suspicion” via Paul Ricoeur (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 124). However, the exposure of the violence contained with the motifs easily dismissed by those who do not hear or totally ignore the dogwhistles is available through the paranoid reading, as it enables a framework of visibility (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 140) that the text, in this case *Agent Carter*, does its best to conceal. In order to excavate the units of discourse (Fairclough, 2010; Foucault, 1972), we have to identify the underlying ideologies purported in the television text that takes so much of its visual cues from Hollywood movies (Flanagan, 2009) and the strategies of reading the Other in the narrative (Certeau & Massumi, 2010). We see this especially in the case of the genre of espionage and noir which rely on the disruption and the return to the order of an underlying national order and gender regime (Attebery, 2002; Hepburn, 2005; Kaplan, 1996).

The paranoid epistemology I rely on from Sedgwick is also informed by discourse theories which emerge from applying concepts of dialogism into cinema, per Martin Flanagan’s understanding of Hollywood Film via Bakhtin (Flanagan, 2009), along with interventionist theories of narrative (Warhol & Lanser, 2015). In Flanagan’s view, and the way I have employed dialogism in reading *Agent Carter*, it is a way of seeing how

discourse in the text relates to discourse in life (Flanagan, 2009, p. 6). The words in the text, the generic constitution of narrative and the articulation gender are all relational and carry more than one meaning. When it comes to cinema and adapted for serial television, despite the limitations of analyzing serial television (Creeber, 2007, p. 5), the utterances, and in this case, the images, are ideologically charged (Flanagan, 2009, p. 6). Compounded with the manner in which nostalgia and irony are deployed in *Agent Carter*, which I analyze further in this chapter, the reactionary politics of the gender regime and national order emerge and are articulated through characterization, post-war setting, and Cold War intrigue narrative. Through dialogism I want to expose how the tacit understanding that the past, i.e. the 1940s was a much worse place to be as a woman and member of a minority population against the present of the period piece production where things are much improved.

When it comes to interventionist theories of narratives, I turn to queer and feminist interventions as brought together in the collection by Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Warhol & Lanser, 2015). The political standpoint of intervening in the narrative of *Agent Carter*, by examining where the articulations of gender in character and plot undermine the television show's own positioning itself as feminist and progressive (Mayers, 2016; Shaw-Williams, 2015). *Agent Carter* is a hybrid of genres, as elucidated in Chapter 1, and that opens up an opportunity to explore the manner in which the narrative of the nation comes about through the gender regime (Mosse, 1996; Nagel, 2003), by way of setting and characterization (Warhol & Lanser, 2015, p. 48).

Agent Carter has an overt agenda of showing Peggy Carter being a singular woman within a male dominated work place, Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR), the old

trope seen often in media that presents itself as feminist (Munford & Waters, 2014; Waters, 2011). The underlying political rhetoric that is articulated through nostalgia and irony, that comes about by reading the television show dialogically, and employs the gender regime constituted through genre conventions. To be clear, I use nostalgia and irony in the following articulations: The nostalgia I identify as a category of analysis comes from Svetlana Boym's conceptualization of restorative nostalgia (Boym, 2001) which Boym writes as "[engaging] in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths" (Boym, 2001, p. 41). That is, returning to a past that is in itself a primary object of nostalgia, imagined as ideal origin. Boym adds, pertinently, "through swapping conspiracy theories" (Boym, 2001, p. 41). The irony that I recognize as used in *Agent Carter* comes from the television's self-awareness of itself as being part of a broader MCU franchise, with self-referential and metafictional moments I discussed in Chapter 1. Another form of irony that is employed in *Agent Carter* in conjunction with nostalgia as conceptualized by Boym, is in the work of ideology as Linda Hutcheon which maintains a hierarchy of social relations of dominance (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 30). *Agent Carter* projects irony regarding its setting in the 1940s, its female superhero, but the reactionary politics that animate the narrative of the television ideologically (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 31).

In the context of *Agent Carter*, nostalgia operates through the prism of an imagined past due to the setting of the television show in the post-war 1940s, inviting Cold War narratives, which are strewn with nostalgic conspiracy theories about Jews (Hepburn, 2005; Litvak, 2006) and homosexuals (Corber, 1997), as enemies within the state. Nostalgia as analyzed through Boym constitutes the imagined history needed for

the imagined community, per Nagel's analysis of gender and sexuality in nation making (Nagel, 2003). *Agent Carter*'s two short seasons push a nationalist agenda by utilizing a conservative gender regime (Connell, 1987; Nagel, 1998, 2003) through the re-creation of a hegemonic nation-state that needs protection against infiltrating monsters that aim to destabilize the nation. In the first the destabilization takes place through the espionage of Soviet infiltrators who are rendered voiceless by the regime and a femme fatale, creating a hierarchy of the USA moral superiority and in need of maintaining strong borders and boundaries, excluding would-be traitors from within. In the context of Season One of *Agent Carter*, the traitors from within are deemed to be those cooperating with the Soviets, made monstrous through their use of female assassins as exemplified through the Soviet femme fatale, Dottie Underwood. In Season Two the destabilization happens through the science/witchcraft of an over-achieving scientist-cum-actress, also a femme fatale, Whitney Frost. Both Dottie and Whitney's villainy is constituted through the articulation of their gender fitting into the genres, as well as contrasting with Peggy herself.

The underlying nationalist discourse that is pervasive throughout *Agent Carter* is gendered. By reading and watching the tv show with a feminist interventionist lens of dialogism the ideological underpinning of the American nation as superior to the Soviet nation becomes clear (Warhol & Lanser, 2015, p. 55) The story of *Agent Carter* centers the moral high ground and grants it to those who serve the national order without thought to their own personal gain, i.e. Peggy serves for the sake of it being the right thing, not for the accolades she may receive. As Peggy says in the final episode of Season One, *Valediction* (Misiano, 2015): "I don't need a congressional honor. I don't need Agent

Thompson's approval or the President's. I know my value. Anyone else's opinion doesn't really matter". The subtext and the progression of the narrative suggests otherwise. That is, through portrayals of emphasized femininity in the aid of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Fleming, 2015), and underpinned by a politic that is white supremacist, misogynist and uses anti-communism in order to scapegoat the masculinities that do not fit the hegemonic imagination of the nation-state, the gender regime is utilized to promote a national order (Pearson, 2016; Seed, 1999). On the surface the television show engages critically with the so-called antiquated gender of the 1940s, nostalgically emphasized through ideals of the American 1950s, the primary decade that in cinema and television is shown as the object of nostalgia (Sprengler, 2009). The subtext of these engages with a national order that emphasizes who is in this gendered club and who is not.

2.2 The Past as Ideal: Nostalgia in *Agent Carter*

With Boym's concept of nostalgia as the underlying structure of nostalgia used in *Agent Carter*, the kind of nostalgia I recognize and use in the capacity of the thesis is the nostalgia that Christine Sprengler conceptualizes in order to explore what she calls deliberate archaism and surface realism (Sprengler, 2009, p. 172). Deliberate archaism serves as a time machine in the text, an imagined history through the showing the past as though it is a present in the narrative (Dika, 2003, p. 7). It is the evocation of a stylized past that exists in the cinematic imagination, maintaining an imagined cultural memory that is used for the framing of *Agent Carter*. *Agent Carter* is not unique among contemporary television shows that are set in the past and use history for the story they wish to tell. Nor is it unique in the way it deploys nostalgia as a way to convey a

particular narrative and mindset that is juxtaposed with and meant to be a critique of contemporary politics. This type of stylized past and history is utilized in *Mad Men* (M. Weiner, 2008) (Beail & Goren, 2015) and in *The Game* (Whitehouse, 2014) (Barnett, 2018). Both these examples are rooted in realistic portrayals of the past, producing a nostalgia for a time gone by and aestheticized in order to shape a particular political landscape, maintaining that even if the past wasn't better, it was certainly more beautiful.

As the examples mentioned above suggest *Agent Carter* uses nostalgia in order to overtly comment on the sexism and racism of the past, positioning itself as a feminist commentator of the historical setting in which it is situated. At the same time, *Agent Carter* tries to toe the line between being realistic to the past while also being politically correct. The imaginary past of *Agent Carter* is meant to appear regressive in direct comparison with the present (of 2015-2016) and it does so through the way it emphasizes femininity within the show's gender constitution. Femininity is constructed as regressive and retrograde (Munford & Waters, 2014, p. 29), and that includes the protagonist, Peggy Carter's, own gender presentation of it by being weaponized, both by Peggy and her corrupted mirror, Dottie (Figures 2 and 6). Gender performance is not a matter-of-fact for Peggy, femininity is wielded as a weapon.

Like other shows, *Agent Carter* raises questions regarding the politics of fiction and the ways popular culture appropriate history and the imagined past, whether the text means to do so or not (Beail & Goren, 2015, p. 7). We watch, and are charmed by, the clothes and culture in the 1940s, all the while relieved that we are not there anymore, but we watch Peggy Carter move through the world, overcoming the arbitrary barriers and borders placed upon her due to her sex and she kicks ass, with impeccable hair and bright

red lipstick. The narrative informs us over and over again that the double standards of femininity are contrived and don't stand up to reality, all the while the female characters are stylized both within and without the show. In the quote below taken from the Season One episode *The Iron Ceiling* (Leto, 2015), the title of which references both the gender regime (the glass ceiling) and the national order (the iron curtain), Jack Thompson, Peggy's overtly sexist colleague, tries to downplay Peggy's expertise in the field. Thompson is the mouthpiece of the setting's sexism and of the hegemonic masculinity of the SSR which acts as a stand-in to the nation and the national order which Peggy serves alongside Thompson.

Thompson: [Sighs] Look, it's great that Carter cracked the code. I am proud of her. I am. But we have no idea what we're getting into over there, okay? I don't need brains. I need brawn. I need...

Peggy: You need someone who speaks the language, not...

Thompson: Ramirez speaks Russian.

Peggy: I spent three years in the mud of the European theater... The Eastern front, the Western front, and everything in between.

Thompson: Yeah, surrounded by some of our best men. (Leto, 2015)

In the post-war 1940s, which look and feel very much like the 1950s – as the main object of nostalgia in the American imagination (Sprengler, 2009) – Peggy is relegated to a secretary in a masculinist office setting of the SSR. The setting of the show in the past enables a freedom to portray certain aspects of femininity and masculinity to the point of absurdity. The gender regime in this way also stands for the politics of the historical day. Truman's foreign policy sets the stage for the start of the Cold War in 1946 and the historic Blacklist and HUAC is utilized as a plot point to provide historicity

to a period action-adventure show that hybridizes many genres under which it operates (Litvak, 2009). The visual cues enable a recognition that *Agent Carter* operates in a setting that has been well established in the past (Sprengler, 2009, p. 112), referenced in popular culture over and over, and certainly in comic book adaptations (Thon, 2017). So much so, that the show itself references the reality of the MCU, see Chapter 1. The 1950s are so strong in style that even though the setting is the 1940s, we get a reference to the coming economic boom of the following decade from the character Angie Martinelli; “The war's over. I thought we were all spending money again,” (Winant, 2015) and it is established as a suburban fantasy, an ideal of heaven to come. The politically incorrect past enables a showing of a sexism and racism that is normalized and supposedly no longer acceptable. But it is through that sexism and the emphasized femininity that Peggy utilizes to her advantage when she operates under the radar of hegemonic masculinity. The constant undermining of Peggy’s abilities is an establishment not only of her frustration, but of the status quo regarding the gender regime that is pushed throughout the television show. The quote below from the Season One *Sin to Err* (Williams, 2015), establishes this well. Peggy and her colleagues discover that Soviets train young girls from a young age to be operatives used to infiltrate the borders of America. Dottie Underwood, the femme fatale, was one of these young girls.

Peggy: Training young girls to be what, assassins?

Thompson: Seems like the Russians would want to train grown men.

Ivchenko: Women are often overlooked, taken for granted. They can slip easily through a man's defenses. (Williams, 2015)

Along with the 1950s suburban and economic fantasy (Figure 8) comes an established nostalgia of gender, so-called real men and real women, always white and all-

American. Peggy is at a disadvantage being an English woman. She has established her belonging to America through her romantic love towards Steve Rogers a.k.a. Captain America, who in the first season provides a metaphor for the American nation itself and operates as an object of desirous belonging. The romantic love is spoken on the same level as patriotism to her chosen country: “Steve Rogers dedicated his mind, his body, his life to the SSR and to this country, not to your bank account. I made the same pledge, but I’m not as good as Steve was. I forgot my pledge running around for you like a corporate spy. So thank you, Howard, for reminding me who Steve was and what I aspire to be.” (Cregg, 2015).



Figure 8 The specter of the nostalgic 1950s suburban fantasy in a dream sequence. From S1E7 SNAFU (2015) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

In Season Two Captain America is absent, and the show moves away from gritty New York to glamorous Hollywood and there is more criticism regarding the function of the state from which the nation must be protected. A tension between the people and the elite that controls the narrative of the nation is referenced in Season One through the

Captain America Adventure Program, an in world radio show that commercializes the history of the world-within-the-show, and in Season Two is shown to be part of the way the “The influential, the powerful, the reptilia and the rodentia” (Trilling, 2016) cabal, called the Council of Nine under the legitimate auspices of the Arena Club, use the media to manipulate reality for their own greed and push an agenda of control. When the radio show is introduced in *Bridge and Tunnel* (Russo, 2015) in Season One, Roxxon oil is just another in-world company whose owner is a sidecharacter. Later in Season Two in the episode *Better Angels* (Platt, 2016), it is revealed that Roxxon oil’s owner along with other industry movers and shakers control the media, the economy, and the political structure of the nation state .

The nostalgia also emerges in the usage of noir elements in the show. The diner which Peggy frequents in Season One is in lieu of the bars sleuths frequent in detective stories and noir films (Knight, 2007; Munford & Waters, 2014; Plain, 2001). The dark alleys of New York city in Season One and the suburban sprawl of Los Angeles in Season Two are some of these elements. The diner-cum-bar is a missing element in Season Two, instead using the various movie sets, calling attention to the artifice of the show and to Hollywood at the same time. *Agent Carter* knows we know it’s not real and makes sure to call attention to its own in-world falsity through these metafictional moments (Waugh, 1996). Related to that falsity and metafiction, the major plot of Season Two is a political race and the element of the Hollywood gossip machine is utilized to effect and the panic of showing overt heterosexual romances covers the queering that may occur in these exclusively male arenas of power (Sedgwick, 1997). The real power

in the hands of an Old Boy's Club that operates in a board room, exclusive and exclusionary club houses.

The gossip machine is related to the way the Council of Nine are in fact in control of the media. This conspiracy element of these villains is an element I analyze at length in Chapter 3. It is important to note that in Season One when the character of Howard Stark is scapegoated by a biased media, and is blacklisted for being a danger to the nation and the narrative establishes him as Other, queered - romantically desiring Captain America - and racialized - coded as Jewish both by his own admitted family history and the manner in which Peggy reacts to his admission (Jakobsen, 2003). In the quote below from the Season One episode *The Blitzkrieg Button* (Cregg, 2015), where Peggy discovers Howard had been lying to her about why he needed her help within the SSR, Howard utters his Jewishness and queerness. Howard's language contains enough meaning and references (Flanagan, 2009, p. 18) to the history of homosexual desire (Corber, 1997) and Jewish assimilation (Aviv & Shneer, 2005), that a revelation cannot help but occur (Sedgwick, 2005).

Howard: I knew how much Steve meant to you, because I know how much he means to me. I was protecting you. Peggy: Oh, don't pretend this is about me and my emotions.

[...]

Howard: My father sold fruit. My mother sewed shirtwaists for a factory. Let me tell you, you don't get to climb the American ladder without picking up some bad habits on the way. There's a ceiling for certain types of people based on how much money your parents have, your social class, your religion, your sex. And the only way to break through that ceiling sometimes is to lie, so that's my natural instinct... to lie. I shouldn't have lied to you. For that, trust me, I am truly sorry.

[...]

Peggy: I think you're a man out for his own gain no matter who you're charging. *You are constantly finding holes to slither your way into in the hope of finding loose change.* (Cregg, 2015) (Emphasis mine).

The reason the above scene is so important in establishing the nostalgia that *Agent Carter* constitutes through the irony of its own self-awareness and self-critique, is that there is no irony in any of what Peggy and Howard say to each other. Howard's utterances render him entirely non-ironic, another piece of the landscape of 1940s New York, and Peggy's response is appropriate for the historical moment, antisemitism along with sexism and racism, was part of the dialogue. However, unlike other moments in the television show in which the sexism is shown as antiquated, the antisemitic moment here is played straight, so to speak. Howard comes out as queer and Jewish (Sedgwick, 2005, p. 75), in the subtext, as analyzed above, but there is nothing in the way that Peggy's uttered her disgust that is meant to be taken as anything other than face value. It is a moment of visibility (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 140) that enables a more robust reading of the entire thread of antisemitism that is strewn through the television show. A thread I analyze and expand upon in Chapter 3.

2.3 Ironic Tension in *Agent Carter*

The past as presented in *Agent Carter* is reliant on historical references while taking liberties with the way it presents and represents the history of the 1940s and 1950s (Barta, 1998; Bishop, 2018). The history that is referenced is also a construct of the noir, espionage, and intrigue elements that constitute the narrative and the gendering of the characters. The irony emerges through the juxtaposition of the fictionality with the

elements taken from history, because *Agent Carter* is an elaboration of the broader franchise universe of the MCU. The irony comes about in the previously established metafictional moments, the audience unfamiliar with the MCU might miss the references, but an audience can interpret the referenced through the irony of self-awareness of fictional within a historical setting (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 10) . The position of the world of fiction which *Agent Carter* relies on references to the historical past that is already constructed through the film industry and is recognized stylistically as such (Rosenstone, 2010), and references to the show's own the fictional past (i.e. the movie it spun off from, *Captain America: The First Avenger*) These references are often played for comedic effect, the ironic positioning of *Agent Carter*'s with regards to the MCU at large. The quote below is an example of the ironic self-referential to *Agent Carter* being a piece of fiction that is part of a broader discourse regarding the story world of the MCU (Boni, 2017). The scene in question is when Peggy approaches Howard to ask him to infiltrate the Arena Club to spy on the Council of Nine, as another wealthy white man of influence. During this scene in *Better Angels* (Platt, 2016) Howard is in a director's chair, filming a movie and Peggy interrupts him by entering by entering the frame, bringing attention to the fiction within the fiction. Howard also brings attention to it:

Howard: I always thought you should be in pictures, Peg. What do you say? Arlene French called in drunk. You want to play a sassy beer wench?

Peggy: I'd rather be the cowboy.

Howard: I like it. I don't think the audience is ready yet.

Peggy: But they're ready for a movie based on a comic book. Sounds like a dreadful idea.

Howard: I'll have you know, this is a historical drama. (Platt, 2016)

The metafictional moment in which the scene brings attention to the fact that the television show is itself based on a comic book and that Peggy is a female superhero constituted in the genre (Waugh, 1996) is imbued with ironic self-reflection and self-awareness (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 185). The ironic self-reflection and self-awareness occur with regard to the portrayal of the characters and their constative gender within genre. For example, the way Howard gains entrance into hegemonic masculinity in Season Two while outing himself as coming from a position of subordinate masculinity (Connell, 1987) as established in the previous section is by being portrayed as a serial womanizer and through his casual sexism. Those are also marks of his assimilation into the American system of white supremacy. He is no longer a scapegoat, as he was in Season One and he is invited into the Arena Club, as shown in the Season Two episode *Better Angels* (Platt, 2016). Another example is the way Dottie Underwood's femininity is weaponized through emphasized femininity, slipping under the radar of the paranoid nation by performing the stereotype of femininity with speech acts and costume, her silence in season one being the indication of her true capabilities. In Season Two both Dottie and Whitney, the feminine villains of the show in total, say they have the opportunity to be and become whomever they want. Dottie says this in the episode *The Lady in the Lake* (Trilling, 2016), as she dons Peggy's signature hat and suit (see Figure 6). Whitney says this in the episode *Smoke and Mirrors* (Platt, 2016), in which we see her be discovered by a Hollywood agent and she changes her name from Agnes Cully to Whitney Frost. This is in direct opposition to the way the narrative discusses Howard Stark whose reinvention from his meager beginning is not shown but told. He is assimilating and assimilated, whereas Dottie and Whitney are infiltrators. There is an

ironic tension between the truth of the characters and the way the viewers know, long before the other main characters, is part of the drama and uses up the ante of the narrative, indicating with whom we are meant to identify and why (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 21).

Agent Carter makes sure to make it obvious that the past was a terrible place, but that it was also an attractive place, the world building enables a visual smorgasbord of period references (Dika, 2003; Sprengler, 2009). At the same time the world building also has an irony that informs the audience, but we know it's no longer appropriate to behave in this way. Sexism is bad, it's in the past. Racism is bad, it's in the past. And the pale and male power structure that enabled it was a conspiracy of powerful men, as opposed to the structuration of the nation from its inception (Mosse, 1996; Nagel, 1998).

The constant care for the nation, the fact that it needs protection from those who might infiltrate it from the inside is a recurring theme and it is animated by the notion that what happened in the 1940s (that is the nostalgic object of the 1950s, per Sprengler, 2009), is happening again in the present, allowing the proliferation of an ideology of gendered domination that is disrupted, per the genre conventions of espionage (Hepburn, 2005), while Peggy, the female superhero, upholds the structure of the nation in the name of caring for and defending it (White, 2007). The references to the way fake news operates and anti-communism in the first season was taken very seriously, as this quote by Peggy in the Season Two episode *Better Angels* indicates: "The Arena Club is fabricating the future just the way that they fabricated the story about Dr. Wilkes. The newspapers I found are proof." (Platt, 2016) (see Figures 10 and 11). In Season One the character of Howard reduced to a convenient scapegoat shows the manner in which the

insidiousness of conspiracy theories can be shifted and shunted, but they originate from this same antisocial idea of who works against the nation and for what reason (Greenblatt, 1990).

In Season One the defense of the nation comes in the form of the plot device of Captain America's blood, a substance that can be used for any manner of things in industry but is also an object of loyalty and desire. It is established in the Season One episode *The Blitzkrieg Button* (Cregg, 2015) what the blood has the potential to be; it is also a signifier for Captain America himself, who, for the characters of Peggy and Howard, he is an object of love and loyalty to the nation. In Season Two the mysterious substance known as Zero Matter, introduced in the episode *A View in the Dark* (Trilling, 2016), is the plot device that moves the characters in the narrative. It is a key that can be harnessed to replace conventional energy, but like nuclear energy it is more dangerous than is previously thought. Trying to control it only brings about more and more disasters. The ideological undercurrents of *Agent Carter* come about in Season Two through the fact that a black man (Jason Wilks) and a woman (Whitney Frost) try to harness it and are ultimately punished for it.

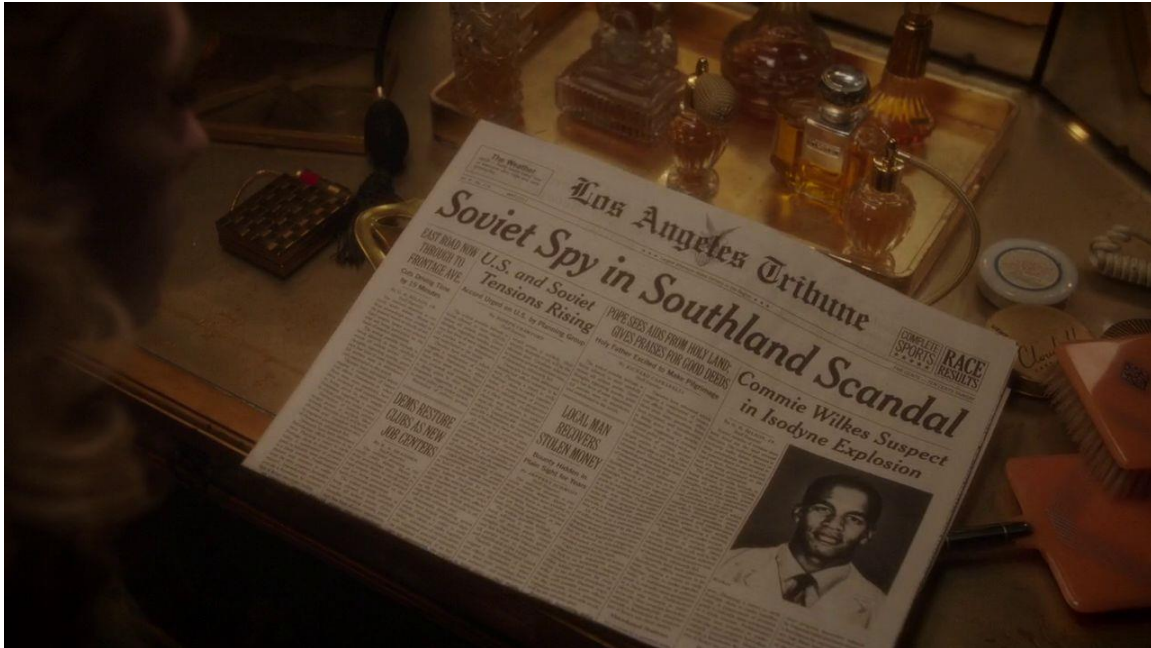


Figure 9 Fabricating communist spies in fake news. From S3E2 *Better Angels* (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

The irony is part of the interpretation of the dynamics of power (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 55) in the television show, as those moments expose the male and pale national order that underlies the logic of *Agent Carter*. Jason loses corporality, essentially becoming a ghost, as seen in the episodes *A View in the Dark* (Trilling, 2016) and *Better Angels* (Platt, 2016) and is framed as a Soviet spy (see Figure 9). In the episodes *The Atomic Job* (Zisk, 2016) and *The Life of the Party* (Zisk, 2016), Whitney harnesses the power of Zero Matter and takes over the Council of Nine, destabilizing the national order and gender order in one fell swoop. This narrative cannot abide the idiosyncrasy (Warhol & Lanser, 2015, p. 55) of a woman in power and it is up to Peggy to return the world to order which she does in the final Season Two episode *Hollywood Ending* (Getzinger, 2016). In that episode Peggy closes the tear in reality, corresponding with the destabilization of the gender regime and national order with the help of her SSR colleagues (see Figure 11) and takes away Whitney's power.

Identifying the gendered difference in the way the characters of Howard and Whitney enter into power (Doane, 1991; Nagel, 2003) of the nation is, in part, recognizing the irony of a television show that purports to be feminist (Iordăchescu, 2016) but when one recognizes that the superhero Peggy Carter is entirely in line with the national order, i.e. pale and male, the national ideology she embodies is hegemonic (White, 2007). For Howard it is his desire to be entirely assimilated into the American dream (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 330), for Whitney it is the desire to be a part, and in fact take over, the cabal that holds the true power of the state within their few hands (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 331).

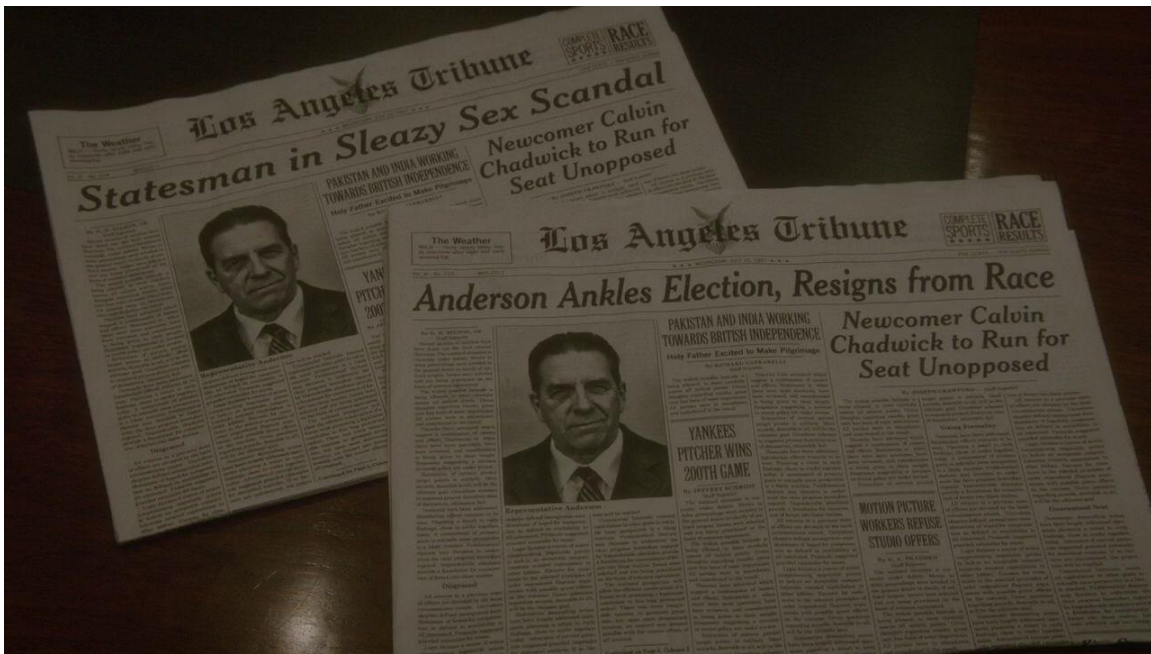


Figure 10 Fake news in the 1940s. From S2E3 *Better Angels* (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

Irony emerges from the manner of the speech acts of the characters, their visual articulation, and the metafictional knowledge expected from the audience (Boni, 2017; Hutcheon, 2005; Waugh, 1996). There is most certainly an implied audience that the creators are expecting to come to the show, part of the entertainment factor comes from

the transmedia position of *Agent Carter* (Hadas, 2014; Thon, 2015). At the same time, the creators use tropes and stereotypes that are part and parcel of a culture that assumes a cultural belonging and understanding of the underlying discourses, mainly those of fairy tales, discussed in Chapter 1 regarding genre and gender, witch-hunts, and nostalgia (Hook, 2012; Sprengler, 2009) for a past that is assumed to be universal. This universality underlies an ideological discourse (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 10) that the audience is expected to tacitly agree with ideologically (Hutcheon, 2005, p. 15). The disruption of the racist and sexist status quo that comes from a woman seeking power who tries to bring into her fold a black man who has never felt a true part of the country, is a moment that exposes the ideological structure of *Agent Carter* (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 168), because as mentioned it cannot be allowed to pass. The quote below from the Season Two episode *Monsters* (Hüseyin, 2016) in which the characters Whitney and Jason interact and argue about the nature of Zero Matter and power in the nation, and who belongs in the national order, if at all:

Whitney: We can help each other. We can help each other understand it. We can help each other control it.

Jason: You can't control it. No one can. It's a force of destruction. Look at what it's done to me, to you.

Whitney: We can change the world.

Jason: The world's just fine as it is.

Whitney: Is it? Do you... do you really believe that Isodyne [Zero Matter laboratory] recruited you because they valued your brilliant mind? You were hired for the same reason that Jane Scott was hired. A woman and a colored man. We're people so marginalized, so desperate for approval, we'll do anything to hold on to what little respect we can get. Easily manipulated and completely expendable.

[...]

But without Isodyne... Where would you be? Would you be scrubbing toilets? Shining shoes for a living? Has there ever been a day where you felt like a real man in this country? (Hüseyin, 2016)

This ironic juxtaposition that *Agent Carter* narratively asserts, that it critiques the sexist and racist nation, all the while Peggy and her allies work to keep the pale and male status quo (Mosse, 1996), becomes an example of the way emphasized femininity comes in as an auxiliary to maintain power (Nagel, 2003). The interpretation through the paranoid epistemology that allows the detection of femininity as a disrupting force (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 143) when it doesn't collaborate with the insidious cabal, but rather takes over the institution which operates as the true power of the state, reveals who are the legitimate guardians of the nation, i.e. those who maintain the status quo. It takes the power of the villain, Whitney Frost, to take over the council, but due to her position outside the national order she is not given the status of hero. Her contact with Zero Matter, along with Jason Wilks, mark them as Other when they are already on the outside of the national order. Peggy and her allies in the SSR, the operators of hegemonic masculinity and the alliance of subordinate masculinities and emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) are given the legitimacy to save the world and work against the Rift, the tear in reality that threatens to destroy the world.



Figure 11 *The Rift, a tear in reality.* From S2E10 *A Hollywood Ending* (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

The paranoid epistemology that allows the revelation of the violence under the surface of narratives is maintained through the construction of nostalgia through the prism of irony. The example of the Rift in reality is meant to be a warning against the misuse of science (See Figure 11), like the potential power of Captain America's blood, as mentioned, but which should only be held in the hands of those deemed legitimate holders of power in the nation, i.e. the male and pale. *Agent Carter* maintains that assertions by the choice of villains (Dottie Underwood and Whitney Frost) and the way they are punished in the text: Dottie by becoming stateless, Whitney by losing her power and being placed in a mental asylum.⁴ In Chapter 3 I discuss the way communism is used to scapegoat anyone who tries to work against the Council of Nine, the conspirational cabal, that operates under the surface of the seats of power and raises the question of

⁴ In this case there is a return to the fairy tale trope of the villainous witch returning to a place of isolation and having her power taken away (Creed, 2007; Schwab, 1996).

who the nation is for and who is a real part of the nation, through the use of antisemitism as a discursive thread.

Chapter 3: Antisemitic Syntheses

3.1 Contextualizing Antisemitic Discourse

In the previous chapters I situated *Agent Carter* within a lineage of genres with a focus on the way they engender the characters. I have argued that the politics of gender emerges by way of nostalgia and the deployment of irony towards that nostalgia. In the current chapter I will explore the result of this nostalgia and the intervention of irony, the insidious thread of political manoeuvring manifested through antisemitic tropes and stereotypes (Bial, 2005; Boyarin et al., 2003; Greenblatt, 1990; Moisan, 2005; Prell, 2003; Ward, 2017).

In Chapter 2 I have already pointed out the ways the character of Howard Stark is coded both as Jewish and queer (Jakobsen, 2003, p. 71; Sedgwick, 2005, p. 75) and so becomes a scapegoat for the plot of nationalist yearning and belonging (Laclau, 1994, p. 65). It is through the understanding of that scapegoating that I realized that there is a deeper underlying discourse that moves the narrative of *Agent Carter*. Through the paranoid epistemology (Sedgwick, 2003) I articulated in the previous chapter, I continue my reading of the television show now.

In my reading the most salient example of the implied antisemitism within the show is Peggy's interaction with Howard in the episode *The Blitzkrieg Button* (Cregg, 2015) in Season One. In Chapter 2 I have already reflected on the scene as an example of the way the gender regime is mobilized in the service of the 'national order' and the way both Peggy's and Howard's desire for Captain America is used to portray their loyalty to the nation. However, it is that very scene that evokes the paranoia I experience when

watching the television show. The thread I identified as being drawn throughout *Agent Carter* first began when I recognized the tropes and stereotypes articulated upon the characterizations of Howard Stark and Ana Jarvis, in particular. The insidiousness perceived through those characterizations enables a paranoid epistemology that facilitates the identification of the underlying nationalist discourse that comes about in the narrative. This paranoia is due to the understanding that the nationalist discourse that the narrative is situated upon uses antisemitic tropes and stereotypes when articulated.

The implied discourse of antisemitism is threaded through the two seasons of *Agent Carter* in different forms, though, in accordance with the various generic traditions. These tropes and stereotypes associated with antisemitism that occur in the two seasons articulates a white supremacist politics that requires, by definition, a conspiratorial establishment (Bergmann, 2018, p. 28) and a scapegoat through which to maintain and reinforce the nationalist power relations (Laclau, 1994, pp. 63–64). These power relations are gendered and sexed according to a hegemonic masculinist structuration that produces an emphasized form of masculinity in complementary auxiliary position that is articulated in the character of Jack Thompson and several other of Peggy Carter's colleagues in the masculinist workplace of the SSR. Her male colleagues are overtly sexist, as discussed in previous chapters. This is to emphasize the hegemonic ideology of the nation that the SSR represents in *Agent Carter*. A subordinate form of masculinity functioning as the scapegoat in the character of Howard; and a monstrous femininity articulated in Season One through Dottie Underwood and in Season Two through Whitney Frost continuously destabilizes the power structure of the post-war nation state as it is portrayed in *Agent Carter* (Creed, 2007). This is in contrast with

Peggy Carter characterized through emphasized femininity, in aid of structuring the hegemonic ideal and ideology.

I argue that the thread of antisemitism is the hinge on which the regressive and reactionary politics turn at the heart of *Agent Carter*. Despite critics' claims of it being an example of feminist television (Ferguson, 2016; Hitchcock, 2015; Iordăchescu, 2016), the narrative and portrayals of the characters tell an undermining story of antisemitism. *Agent Carter* has a strong lead character but the reliance on a singular strong female character keeps the feminist work at bay and makes it into a woman-centered product only (Boyd, 2015), – the single individualized woman hero in a masculinist environment is the exception that proves the rule - i.e. a reactionary national order. In this chapter I take into account the position of *Agent Carter* as a conservative example of a cultural product within specific hybridized genres. These hybridized genres and the constitution of the way gender is articulated hold within them a nationalist discourse that leaks into instances in which antisemitism emerges and comes to be exposed through the paranoid epistemology of reading I use to excavate the discourse with the tools of interventionist narratology.

My analysis is meant to explore the manner in which the storyworld references the political reality of which it is a product (Boni, 2017). A cultural product that means to critique yet cannot help but reify and reiterate the discourses that push the narratives within the fictional past that it elucidates. This critique falls flat and away from the intent of the narrative by the reiteration and reification of the very reactionary politics the show believes it is moving against.

Agent Carter relies on narratives of conspiracy and a Cold War background to the stories it is telling about political power and the way espionage operates in the 1940s (Corber, 1997, pp. 10–11). This world can be exposed to be sexist and this way a failure in producing a feminist superhero with the help of George Mosse's theorizations of nationalism, sexuality, and masculinity (Mosse, 1996). The fictional constitution of nationalism in *Agent Carter* is made of heterosexualized masculinity and the implied constitutive element of antisemitism. George Mosse's theorization on nationalism, sexuality, masculinity becomes fundamental in recognizing the way gendered nationalist discourse operates within *Agent Carter*.

In the following sections I expose and weave the thread of antisemitism through the results of my analysis. It is essential to explicitly position myself within this reading and reiterate that the moment of writing this thesis is political and that there is an added value to excavating these codes that are placed in a popular piece of culture. Whether there was intent or not is not relevant, the patterns of discourse that emerge and are reified are what end up circulated in popular culture. And due to the covert, dogwhistle nature of antisemitism (Goodin & Saward, 2005; Gramer, 2018) in anglophone media as opposed to being overt (Ward, 2017), it is essential that it be recognized and pointed out in order for it to be combated.

3.2 The Antisemitic Thread

I discussed paranoid reading as per Sedgwick's conceptualization as a reading that relies on exposure as knowledge production (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 138). In Chapter 2 I analyzed

moments of visibility that the paranoid epistemology facilitates in exposing. I find it useful for exposing the covert subtexts I identify throughout *Agent Carter*. There is the potential danger in the exploration of subtexts and wanting to see what isn't there, I agree. However, tropes and stereotypes in literature, cinema, and culture writ large, manifest themselves discursively over and over again to the point of acquiring 'commonsense' status (Fairclough, 2010), the intent of the author or creator notwithstanding (Sedgwick, 1997). As with any other cultural reading of a text, the task of the analyst consists in exposing the taken-for-granted, unsaid assumptions on which the said, overt statements depend for their recognition as "meaningful": thus my task consists in exposing antisemitism produced in and by the television show texts and show whether they are overt (Greenblatt, 1990; Prell, 2003) or subtextual (Baron, 2003; Bial, 2005). This implied antisemitism, its common-sense covert referencing has a long history. It is this history that I identify strewn throughout *Agent Carter* as a text that references the past (Rosenstone, 2010) and establishes the history of the universe in which it is situated as "given".

The superhero comic book as a genre in North America is authored by the children of Jewish immigrants in the late 1930s and early 1940s, who could find a niche in a nascent industry. Jack Kirby, the legendary artist and creator of multiple Marvel comic characters is one of them. He is credited, along with Joe Simon, with creating *Captain America*. The people who started the superhero comic book genre have their beginnings in the same manner as the character of Howard Stark⁵ describes in *The*

⁵ More to the point, the positioning of Jewish identity within comic book adaptations has always been ambivalent, especially when you consider that there are many Jewish comic book characters within the Marvel comic book franchise. Two of the most explicitly Jewish characters in Marvel comics are Magneto and Kitty Pryde (Baron, 2003; Darowski, 2014; Liepach, 2007), their Jewishness is a major parts of their

Blitzkrieg Button (Cregg, 2015). The fictional character's biography closely resembles that of the real man who created Captain America (Liepach, 2007, p. 253). On the surface, you could say that the creators of *Agent Carter* were paying an homage to one of the forerunners of the genre from which the television adaptation originated. The intent, perhaps, was to pay homage to the creator of Captain America, considering that Howard Stark, in the plot of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, is among the scientists who give Steve Rogers his superpowers just as Jack Kirby and Joe Simon were the creators of the comic book character of Captain America. As previously established, Howard Stark, especially in Season One, is labeled a traitor. In a post-war Cold War setting, the scapegoating of Howard is not without a history in itself. The show goes at length to reference both that history and the broader MCU world, directly quoting from *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) that came out in 2012 (the fictional future of *Agent Carter*), enabling metafictional engagements with the audience that is supposedly knowledgeable and understands the reference in the first place.

With the help of this intertextual referencing to the discourse of Cold War persecution, the television show evokes and reiterates a tradition that is not arbitrary at all. Taken in isolation, Howard's characterization in *Agent Carter* could have been an homage to Jack Kirby as the creator of Captain America. However, when taking into account the tradition of the genre that *Agent Carter* is situated in, there emerges the insidiousness of the national order in both its gender regime and its antisemitism. In the quote and image (Figure 12) below from the first episode of Season One *Now Is Not the End* (D'Esposito, 2015) a Newsreel announcer contextualizes who Howard is to the

histories and narratives and often in correspondence with their position as an oppressed minority of mutants within the comic book franchise.

audience – as an industrialist and pilot who was a major part of the American war effort during the Second World War⁶ and also metafictionally signals (Waugh, 1996) to the broad world of the MCU, referencing *The Avengers* (2012) film in which Howard’s son, Tony Stark, the superhero Iron Man, refers to himself as a “Billionaire, playboy...” (Whedon, 2012). In the context of *Agent Carter* Howard falls from grace through the plot development that uses the history of Cold War persecution. While the quote shows the absurdity of the HUAC proceedings, the narrative reiterates the idea that Howard was always-already prosecutable. I expand upon this throughout the analysis.

Voiceover Announcer: [Howard Stark's] most recent exploits threaten to send this flyboy into a nosedive. Accused of selling weapons to the enemy, the founder of Stark Industries was recently called to Capitol Hill.

Howard: May I ask a question?

Webster: Not until you answer the question already before this committee.

Howard: It's been so long, I don't even remember what it was.

Webster: Did you knowingly sell military-grade technology to enemies of the United States?

Howard: Not knowingly.

Webster: Did you do it unknowingly?

Howard: Now, by definition, that would be impossible to answer. (D’Esposito, 2015)

⁶ Established in the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)

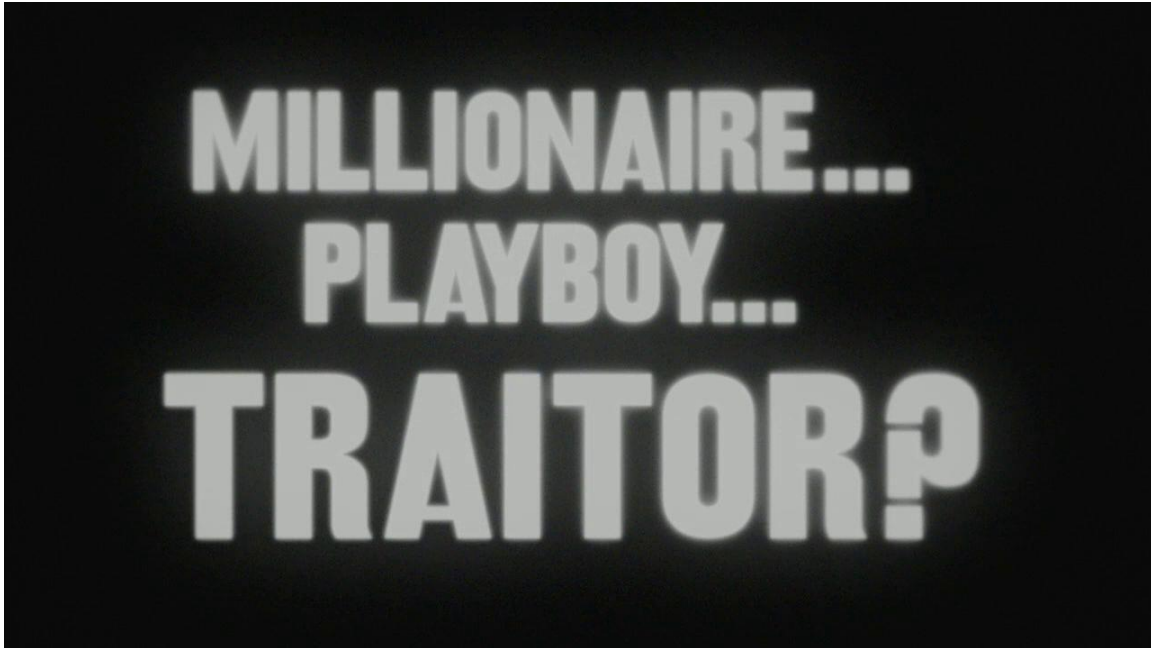


Figure 12 Metatextual newsreel referencing *The Avengers* (2012). From S1E1 *Now Is Not the End* (2015) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

The more overt Jewish aspect in Season One is concentrated upon Howard Stark and upon the non-visible Ana Jarvis, the only character specifically mentioned to be Jewish in the text of *Agent Carter*. The indirect articulation of antisemitism occurs not only in their characterization but in the way that the narrative uses them and other tropes to push the plot on in the two seasons. In relation to Howard's character, various tropes of degeneracy and stereotypes of Jewish tendencies are mobilized. This, along with the fact that in Season One, romantic desire towards Captain America corresponds with national yearning for belonging and assimilating to the nation (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 310), per the history that Howard's character utters in the episode *The Blitzkrieg Button* (Cregg, 2015) is analyzed in Chapter 2. Howard and Peggy parallel each other in that Captain America's blood is used as a metaphor for their loyalty to the nation. The blood is a plot

device that motivates both Howard and Peggy in the narrative of national belonging (Sedgwick, 1997, p. 332).

The plot in *Agent Carter* draws on the real history of the House Un-American Activity Committee (HUAC) established in order to fight sedition against the state from within the United States. The continuous paranoia regarding infiltration was part of the narrative of the United States from the very start of the Cold War era and *Agent Carter* uses that narrative for the show's own dramatic purposes. One of the strategies used by the HUAC – the very committee that is referenced in the quote from *Agent Carter* above – from the 1940s until its dissolution in 1975 was the use of blacklisting.⁷ In the post-war 1940s and 1950s, during a time of heightened Jewish assimilation, it was mostly Jews who were targeted by the blacklist and antisemitism became an impetus force through which infiltration was understood (Bial, 2005, p. 65; Hepburn, 2005, p. 66; Krutnik, 2007, p. 39). Though hardly the only ones targeted by HUAC and the blacklist, Jews as well as homosexuals were overly represented as targets of Cold War McCarthyism⁸ (Corber, 1997; Krutnik, 2007) which sought to eradicate what was believed to be a communist infiltration of the United States by the Soviet Union (Krutnik, 2007, p. 228).

The narratives of conspiracy come about in the persecution of Jews and homosexuals by the state (Mosse, 1996, p. 68), as an internal enemy that aims to

⁷ HUAC implemented a blacklist of undesirable people who were prohibited from working within the government, the school system, and Hollywood. If one's name was on the list, you were prohibited from working. The Hollywood blacklist is perhaps the most well-known historically as it received high profile protests against it by actors, writers, and other workers in Hollywood. The Hollywood Ten, the first group of Hollywood workers to be blacklisted by HUAC in 1947, are specifically referenced in the *Agent Carter* episode *Smoke and Mirrors* (Platt, 2016).

⁸ Named after American Senator Joseph McCarthy who was a member of HUAC and was the one who pushed for blacklisting anyone who had any connection to communism in which antisemitism and homophobia were part and parcel of the historic persecution in the United States (Corber, 1997; Krutnik, 2007).

destabilize (or even destroy) the nation either through deviant masculinity when it comes to homosexuals (Corber, 1997, p. 145) or through the proliferation of communism when it comes to Jews (Litvak, 2006). The two identities have an analogous alliance (Jakobsen, 2003) that emerges through their marked as Other within a heterosexualized masculine nation. The always-already heterosexual nation-state (Peterson, 2000) needs a foil upon which it can project all the undesirable and subordinate forms of masculinity (Connell, 1987) that establish the gendered national ideal. Both Jews and homosexuals deviate from the heterosexualized masculinity of the American nation that is represented in *Agent Carter*, constituted through its period setting of Cold War persecution.

With the above historical context in mind, the theme of infiltration is a central one in *Agent Carter*, specifically in Season One. The history of Soviet infiltration paranoia corresponds with the assimilationist tactic of Jews in America (Aviv & Shneer, 2005; Bial, 2005). George Mosse discusses how the Jew is constructed as a perpetual outsider both through physiognomy and narrative stereotypes (Mosse, 1996, p. 61). These stereotypes, while having roots much farther back than modernity or the National Socialist spin (Mosse, 1996, p. 91), are the ones that are retained within popular culture, disseminated both knowingly and unknowingly. The thread of antisemitism holds the political order of *Agent Carter* together. It is patterned and articulated in the narrative (Laclau, 1994) in Season One through, first of all, the evocation of the metaphor of blood libel, that is, the accusation of vying for the nation's blood in order to undermine it from within and, secondly, the accusation of the motivation of greed and in Season Two through the conspiratorial cabal that holds the true power of the nation.

I continue the analysis of Howard's desire or vying for blood, the blood that is a metaphor for the nation and the history of the blood libel. It can be argued that Howard's Jewishness is brought into being (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 61) by the narrative. The blood libel characteristic of Howard's desire is an imposed Otherness. The blood of a man who embodies the nation and is termed the "Blitzkrieg Button" due to the manifold abilities it is purported to have, it is something of a panacea that both heroes and villains are chasing in the television show. So in this quest for belonging, trying to clear his name and bring himself back into the fold of the nation, he is reconstituted as the Other (Ahmed, 2005, p. 105), as mentioned above. An "Other" through which Peggy herself can be reconstituted as a loyal member of the nation, both through her disgust at what she now knows is Howard's Jewishness and as the text's protagonist.

Until the moment of revelation, for Peggy and everyone, Howard is an assimilated white man of wealth in America. Being termed Public Enemy Number One in the first episode of Season One *Now Is Not the End* (D'Esposito, 2015) puts a damper on his achievement of assimilation: his rejection out of the nation is paralleled by Peggy's rejection of him. The stink that now surrounds him raises questions regarding the porous quality of the nation that arbitrarily decides who belongs and why. It also raises questions at the same time as to whether the blood can be anything more than a metaphor for the unachievable goal of belonging to a nation seeking out scapegoats through which it formulates itself (Ahmed, 2005, p. 107; Tomkins, 1995, p. 139).

The nation in *Agent Carter* formulates itself through paranoia. Paranoia which is historically contingent in the fictional telling and which constitutes itself through the affective motions of the characters. Through Peggy, the protagonist with whom the

viewer is meant to identify as a point of view character. Her love for Steve, a.k.a. Captain America, is a love for the nation. She has committed herself to being like Steve and thereby becoming part of the nation: “Steve Rogers dedicated his mind, his body, his life to the SSR and to this country... I made the same pledge, but I'm not as good as Steve was” (Cregg, 2015). If she is disgusted by Howard’s Jewishness and agrees with the paranoia of the state that marks him as traitor, perhaps, then, the state is right when stigmatizing Howard as the bisexual Jew who infiltrated the nation and assimilated, whose love for the nation cannot be as true as Peggy’s for exactly those reasons.

The binary of knowledge/secret comes about through Howard’s revelation of his Jewishness to Peggy. It is Peggy’s knowing about Howard that morally stains him, and which allows Peggy to become superior to him. It is the gendered national discourse that makes Peggy’s desire and belonging normative and Howard’s deviant (Greenblatt, 1990) that enables this superiority. Peggy knows Howard’s secret, she sniffs it out, and she now *knows* (regardless of Howard’s denials) that his reason for going after the blood of the nation, Captain America’s blood, is all in the name of greed. Howard denies this, of course, “What the hell do you think of me?” (Cregg, 2015). We know what Peggy thinks of him and how we are meant to think of him as well. Contempt is a contagious affect and through it we know who to Other (Ahmed, 2005, p. 100) especially when Howard confides in her that he is one of those infiltrators, one who hid his true identity so well that he was impossible to detect (Litvak, 2006, p. 9)- Although, in retrospect, it could not be more obvious, all the clues are there, if you are paranoid enough to detect them (Sedgwick, 2005, p. 100). For Peggy, the stink of Howard’s actual identity permeates every aspect of how she sees him. In the words of Silvan Tomkins: “The awareness of

disgust and nausea is not limited to offensive tastes and smells but readily accompanies a wide spectrum of entities which need not be tasted, smelled, or ingested.” (Tomkins, 1995, p. 136). This disgust towards Jewishness along with homosexuality (in this particular case the coded bisexuality) has been conceptualized by Mosse’s discussion of the way Jews and homosexuals were often placed together as degenerates that were foils for hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, which as mentioned, discursively corresponds with the national ideal (Mosse, 1996, p. 68).

Though Howard is exonerated by the end of the television show, his identity is now ‘known’. His implied bisexuality and Jewishness are part of the characterization that marks his desire for Captain America, both romantically and ‘economically’, when accused of wanting Captain America’s blood for his own business. In the discursive current of the gender regime corresponding with the national order, the desire is that for national belonging – but one that is implied undesirable for the nation. Through the revelation of his Jewishness and bisexuality to Peggy, she now acquires some knowledge about Howard that is understood through the binary of knowledge/secret (Sedgwick, 2005, p. 94).

Howard’s revelation and Peggy’s reaction rely on binaries Sedgwick identifies and utilizes in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick, 2005), specifically those of cognition/paranoia and secrecy/disclosure (Sedgwick, 2005, p. 100). The text of *Agent Carter* keeps Howard’s bisexuality ambiguous in the show and the revelation segues into the articulation of Peggy’s antisemitism towards him. Howard was not expecting contempt and disgust from Peggy, he was expecting sympathy and solidarity, establishing the fact that they are more similar than they are different. In my paranoid epistemic

standpoint, I can't help but suspect that the viewer is meant to identify with Peggy's contempt and disgust, rather than with Howard's revelation, due to her position as protagonist.

In both Season One and Season Two Howard articulates his desire to assimilate into the masculinist nation by emphasizing Jarvis and Peggy's foreignness, calling them his favorite foreigners in a scene in the Season One episode *Time and Tide* (Winant, 2015). And in the Season Two episode *Better Angels* (Platt, 2016) Howard's assimilation is used to infiltrate the Arena Club, the arena of true national power. This occurs while Howard fulfills another Jewish stereotype that features over and over again in popular culture - a Hollywood executive.⁹ This continuous mark of degeneracy on Howard is presented as humorous, portraying Howard as a frivolous dilettante. As mentioned, these stereotypes have a history and are not articulated in a vacuum.

Another example of the articulation of Jewishness as Other is through the characterization of Ana Jarvis. She is the only character explicitly specified as Jewish, but she is the one hidden from the screen in Season One. We only hear her as a disembodied voice, performing the sexist gag of a feminine voice speaking over the shoulder of a man. She then emerges in Season Two as Jarvis' other half and there she is portrayed as a fantasy of emphasized feminine support for an auxiliary subordinate masculinity, the British butler situated in New York City and Los Angeles.

While it is apparent that the men who hold real power are not Jewish, that is not the point. The point is that a conspiratorial secret society that holds "the true power" of

⁹ The Hollywood Ten (Ceplair, 2011, p. 77) are referenced directly in Season Two when soviet infiltration is once again used to scapegoat a scientist that won't cooperate with the cabal of white men who hold the true power of the state, while the nation continues to be an ideal towards which the characters must strive.

society is an old antisemitic trope (Bergmann, 2018; Laclau, 1994). Even if the scapegoats are not named as Jewish, the figuration retains a history that is antisemitic. Just because something is not specifically attributed to a minority community, it doesn't mean that the attribution isn't there discursively (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 59). The very fact that the narrative of the television show is driven towards an idea that the nation is good, but the power is rotten, is evidence of a critique that dares not cross the line regarding the nation as an ultimate identifying category. The nation as an idea and as an ideal cannot be deconstructed within the television show, but power can be, especially if it isn't systemic, but rather held by a corrupt few associated with Jewishness. The show tries to problematize systemic power that marginalizes women and other minority (sexual) identities. However, it undermines itself by giving power to the secret society that is said to hold the real power to affect lives within the nation-state, rather than expose how the structuration of the nation as ideological and how that structure of stratified society is maintained through gendered, sexed, and raced relations of power.

3.3 The Political Consequences of the Antisemitic Thread

The nation as a homogenized and exclusionary and exclusively gendered and raced club is also what renders *Agent Carter*, at the end of the day, a discursive site of conservative ideologies when it comes to gender and race. Gender in this narrative is also a configuration of sexuality which is a pillar of the national ideal. The nation as residing on foundations of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexist ideals rests upon the specifications of who is excluded and who is included with the nation. As a product of popular culture, *Agent Carter* reifies and reconstitutes the dominant ideologies and renders any sort of feminist critique undermined. A queered and feminist intervention

into the narrative (Sedgwick, 1997; Warhol & Lanser, 2015) along with the recognition of underlying exclusionary narratives and tropes excavate the constitution of othered identities within the television show.

The intersection of crime and espionage genres brings about a narrative that holds within it the nation as the ideal that needs to be defended by infiltrators and protected from the identities that would sully it from within. There is a necessary ‘wholeness’ that needs to be reified within the genre, there needs to be an untrustworthy foreigner for the genre to work within its parameters (Hepburn, 2005, p. 52). *Agent Carter* as a cultural text falls within those parameters and doesn’t engage critically with the history of the genre that constitutes it. The fiction attempts to critique the genre when it comes to content. But it is operationalized through discourse, continuing the patterning that moves it forward and keeps it well within the conventions of the genre and constitutive gendering elements of the characters within that genre.

These tropes go beyond the articulation of Jews as interlopers and marked Others within the nation. The tropes perform a function of moving the narrative towards the idea that the dominating power structure is conspiratorial rather than systemic. That it is a council of pale and male men that operationalize the dominating power of exclusion within the nation-state. This structuration of power within *Agent Carter* exonerates the nation from criticism regarding the marking of others as not belonging within the gendered and racialized national order. In the political moment in which *Agent Carter* was produced and emerged, the conspiratorial operationalization found a foothold within contemporary political discourse (Fairclough, 2010; Ward, 2017) and was translated into the fiction of the television show. In this sense, *Agent Carter* references paratextual

occurrences in the world beyond the text, fake news (see Figures 9 and 10)- though the idea of having two different headlines ready for publication is not new historical patterns of persecution, and the broader world of the MCU. All of these references operate in accordance with the greater world of genres in the story world. The consequences of this particular world building are that *Agent Carter* marks the greater course of the MCU with a nationalist and conservative streak¹⁰.

The effect of these nationalist and conservative streaks is that they continue to be vehicles of/for the cultural proliferation of oppressive power relations and dynamics. Situated within popular discourse that is coded and hidden beneath narratives that proclaim themselves feminist but are in fact reiterations of heterosexist fantasy constructs. *Agent Carter*'s metafictional moments bring into focus an awareness that there are gendered expectations of femininity and masculinity, but they are self-referential in-jokes of the historical location of the plot. The narrative consists of romantic ideas of nation and of women who are outside their place as disruptive forces. Peggy, the singular exception to the rule, cannot help but prove the rule. Moreover, the ways in which the villains of *Agent Carter* are articulated cannot help but be regressive portrayals of women. Inadvertently their femininity is constructed as dangerous even though they are more rounded characters with motives that are self-serving in the case of Whitney Frost and she is punished for being power hungry or nationalist in the case of Dottie Underwood after which she ends up stateless.

¹⁰ In the midst of writing this thesis the final movie of the current cycle of the Marvel Cinematic Universe was released. *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo, 2019) ending was that of a heterosexual couple kissing in the middle of a 1940s suburban living room. The ideology wrapped up in that scene is discussed in chapter 2. What is worth noting and exploring further is the fact that this couple was made up of Agent Peggy Carter and Steve Rogers, Captain America, the stand in for the nation throughout Season One of *Agent Carter*.

Agent Carter joins other products of popular culture that mediate and proliferate ideologies of the nation and gender with a specifically antisemitic underpinning. As mentioned, it is not the specificities of marking the Jew as an Other within the national order that mobilizes antisemitic discourses. The tropes and figuration of these tropes can be assigned to different Others and minoritized identities within the nation. The mediation and proliferation of gendered nationalist ideologies come about through the presentation of subordinate masculinities. The character of Jason Wilks, the black scientist, wishes to assimilate and is rendered incorporeal. He becomes a ghost, haunting the white supremacist structure of the American Nation.¹¹ In the case of Daniel Sousa, the disabled war veteran, whose body is assigned as less masculine and less useful than the hegemonic ideal, we have another character made into a ghost, the ghost of the Second World War that haunts the post-war historical setting of *Agent Carter*¹².

Neither of these characters are articulated to be antisemitic renderings. But their position as forms of subordinate masculinities within the gender regime making up the national order has an antisemitic history that is traceable. Joane Nagel has discussed the construction of the nation as a masculinist and heterosexist project (Nagel, 1998, 2003). *Agent Carter* may be situated in the past due to its period piece setting, but I argue that due to its constitution in contemporary political reality, it pushes the position of women within the hegemonic meaning making of the nation. Peggy Carter can be argued to be a particular articulation and hegemonic femininity (Paechter, 2018). In the show, she goes

¹¹ There is certainly a critical race and historical reading regarding the position of blackness within the context of the post-war setting in *Agent Carter*, within the prism of masculinity and race within the broader MCU context.

¹² There is also an invitation to study *Agent Carter* through the prism of disability studies and new materialism, as the body as a lens of analysis is a crucial part of character and gender articulation throughout the television show and the broader aspects of the MCU.

beyond her position as auxiliary of the gender regime in the form of emphasized femininity within the hegemonic national order.

A consequence of Peggy's character as articulation of hegemonic femininity, while simultaneously seeking the approval of the state, is an increase in the gendering of the national order and the need to mark an excluded Other, who happens to be the character of Howard Stark. Rather than a feminist intervention of the genre of espionage and noir, *Agent Carter* becomes a reiteration of the conservative conventions it claims to subvert. Antisemitism is the hinge upon which this neoconservative reiteration of femininity rests. Not only because *Agent Carter* deploys characters explicitly coded Jewish but rather because it is the white supremacist politics of the show that implicates Jewishness as a foil for the national order. A particular example of this narrative mechanism is when Ana Jarvis, the one and only overtly Jewish character, is reduced to a plot device for Edwin Jarvis' arc. She is shot, and she becomes infertile (Figure 13). What follows is a mourning period in which the futurity of Ana and Jarvis' union is brought into question. They do not mourn a lost child, but rather a child that never can be:

Doctor: We saved her life. But there were some complications, some damage we couldn't fully repair. I don't know if you and your wife had ever planned on having children... But that won't be possible now.

Jarvis: Does she know?

Doctor: We have a nurse who can sit down with your wife and explain everything to her.

Jarvis: Thank you, no. I'll talk to her myself. (Hüseyin, 2016)



Figure 13 Ana after being shot in her reproductive organs. From S2E7 *Monsters* (2016) - Marvel Television - ABC Studios

This type of mourning is deconstructed in Lee Edelman's "No Future" (Edelman, 2007) wherein he questions the structuration of the ethics of the potential child and the way the future is encapsulated through that child. In the context of *Agent Carter*, the very fact that it is a Jewish woman who loses the capability of having a future, while canonically established as being rescued from being murdered by the Third Reich during the Second World War is another current of the regressive politics established in the television show.

The regressive politics come about through sentimentality and compassion towards Ana's infertility. Yes, there is a tragic irony in the fact that a Jewish woman who was rescued from what would have been certain death is now incapable of heterosexual reproduction. That is the loci of conservative political articulation (Edelman, 2007, p. 89). While the gender regime as it corresponds with the national order inculcates a notion that heteronormative coupling would be ideal, the very fact that the show uses the overtly

foreign couple to render incapable of reproducing, raises the question as to whether they were a legitimate heteronormative couple in the first place. The narrative pushes the ironic tragedy of a heterosexual couple becoming infertile in the face of a nostalgic 1950s ideal of suburban family life. When corresponding with the discourse of the nation through this plot of infertility through violence, it becomes a point of contention regarding who can or cannot reproduce. With the knowledge of the genocide of the Jews under the surface of Ana Jarvis' characterization with no reproductive futurity, the narrative raises questions regarding her belonging to the nation in which she resides.

Just as irony was shown to be deployed (see Chapter 2) when it comes to the way nostalgia is used in the rendering of the past, so irony is deployed here. The irony reinforces the tragic function of Ana's character in the side plot and along with the paranoid epistemology used throughout the analysis identifies the way the television show, whether inadvertently or not, marks the only Jewish figure as an ultimately tragic figure. This figuration of tragedy is not without a history. Though it is not through antisemitic associations that Ana is rendered tragic because of her infertility, the very fact that she is articulated as the one who will lose a future in the name of preserving a different future, narratively speaking, engages an interventionist ethics regarding the nature of future that is in fact being preserved (Edelman, 2007, p. 151).

The articulation of no futurity in relation to Ana Jarvis' body brings about a troubling realization, that the only Jewish character, and an embodiment of emphasized femininity is the one whose futurity is nipped in the bud. A Jewish futurity within Agent Carter and the broader MCU is brought to a stop, through a character saved from genocide, as was told in the Season One episode *Time and Tide* (Winant, 2015). It is the

lack of futurity for her and for Jarvis specifically, because through the storyworld that *Agent Carter* belongs to we know that the entirely assimilated Howard Stark has a son, who we know will start the entire MCU, in *Iron Man* (Favrou, 2008). Peggy's story in the television show ends with a heterosexual kiss between her and Daniel Sousa.¹³

The analysis of the characters through the prism of antisemitism, along with the tropes and figurations that come together both in the noir and espionage genre as well as the study of the role of nostalgia in the historic period piece is, I believe, a marker of the conservative articulations of ideologies in *Agent Carter*. The elements of the various conservative conventions are rendered together through antisemitism as the implied thread of the political order.

¹³ In a fascinating turn of events, at the end of the 2019 movie *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo, 2019) we see the current storyworld cycle of the Marvel Cinematic Universe which began in 2008 with *Iron Man* (Favrou, 2008) ending with a suburban heterosexual kiss between Peggy Carter and Steve Rogers a.k.a Captain America.

Conclusion

The story I have attempted to tell in this thesis is one that seeks to be concealed under a layer of frivolity and low cultural stakes. The story *Agent Carter* attempts to tell is that of a heroine standing up against the systemic discrimination of. On the surface that is exactly what the television show does, taking Peggy Carter as a singular character working with her allies trying to save the world in spite of itself. If one pushes against the grain of the story, pushes against *Agent Carter*'s own employment of self-aware irony in the aesthetic and nostalgic surface, it is possible to uncover the narratives that emerge from the discursive articulation of the characters and the setting in which they are constituted.

Through establishing *Agent Carter* within its genealogy of genres, the way characters are gendered through their conventions I articulated the way the television show retains a mainstay of conservative genre conventions through which a gender regime and corresponding national order emerge. The manifestation of this regime and order come about through a deployment of nostalgia and irony that carry with them narratives of reactionary politics. There is a necessity for scholarship to expose these reactionary politics in popular culture and the media in general and that was the aim of my analysis and my research questions. The exposure of these reactionary politics that rely on conservative narratives of gender, nation, and conspiracy. These reactionary politics hinge on tropes and figurations that originate in antisemitic articulations.

Throughout the analysis I relied on Eve Sedgwick's paranoid epistemology as a theoretical framework, along with Tzvetan Todorov's conceptualization of genre,

Svetlana Boym and Christine Sprengler's ideas surrounding nostalgia, and Linda Hutcheson's analysis of irony. I argue that *Agent Carter* is a case study of reading antisemitic articulations that can be found all over the MCU and in the adaptations of the comic book genre in general.

Within the context of cultural studies, feminist and gender scholarship of pop-culture *Agent Carter* has slipped under the radar of analysis and interpretation. This is due, I believe, due to the fact that the films that formulate the Marvel Cinematic Universe have a greater pull in scholarship along with the study of comic books as cultural artifacts in general. Moreover, *Agent Carter* was short-lived, having only two short seasons, it did not get the chance to expand its own world in the franchise. I speculate that this had to do with the period setting, that it created a distance between the show and the broader MCU – for example, the other spin-off show *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* is much more successful both commercially and when it comes to scholarship, and it has had direct tie-ins to the films as they were released in cinema.

At this point of writing my analysis of *Agent Carter* has limitations, as there has not been any scholarship that pertains to this particular text in the years since the show first broadcast. It was necessary to situate the show within the genealogy of genre in order to even begin discussing the manner in which the gender of the characters is constituted and thus politicized. Through this gendered politization, the period setting and its relationship to the present needed to be expanded upon, by analyzing the employment of nostalgia and irony. Those two lenses of analysis were the building blocks upon which I constructed the analysis of how the gender regime discursively corresponds with the

national order through the thread of antisemitism that establishes who is included and who is excluded from the nations.

Agent Carter is a rich text that can be read through a multitude of theories and scholarships; crip theory, new materialism, affect are theoretical framework that would be well suited in order to expand upon the scholarship of this particular text. Queer theory and narratology are the theories that suited my research question regarding the manifestations of gender, nationalism, and the Jewish other, and the structuration of narratives that produce this Othering. Other forms of Othering regarding gender, race, sexuality, and disability, just to name a few can and should be explored further in *Agent Carter*. The show is both isolated piece of text within a broad franchise and it is in constant reference to the storyworld from which it originated. As such, it is an arena in which scholarship pertaining to metafiction and relationships between texts through multiple theories can be accomplished.

It is my hope that this thesis is only the beginning of more research about *Agent Carter* and the articulations of reactionary politics through the figurations of antisemitism in popular culture and media.

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