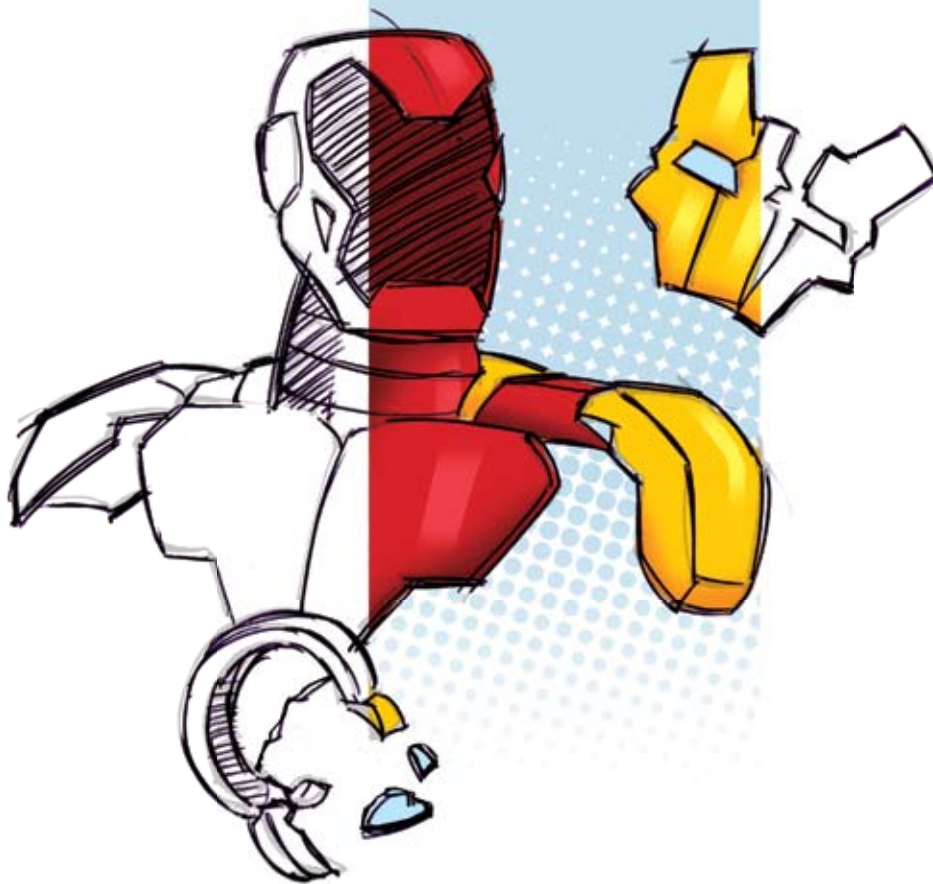


“My Suits...They’re Part Of Me”

Considering Disability in the *Iron Man* Trilogy

Travis Wagner



The disabled body has a storied history in cinema, which stretches back to Classical Hollywood and continues to emerge in contemporary film.

Indeed, the reflective nature of the filmic narrative affords it an ability to portray disability in a very “cognitive” manner, wherein Michael Bérubé believes that disabled bodies and the field of disabled studies can “reread” both films blatantly and indirectly about disability as texts of “self-representation,” even if in purely allegorical terms (576). This exploration of allegories of disability in cinema is highly beneficial for critical endeavors. Such openness to readings means that both traditional depictions of disability that occur in films like *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932), as well as allusions to themes of disability in contemporary blockbusters, afford a larger dialogue on non-abled identities. In the past, a film like Browning’s cult classic depicted its characters with great sympathy, while also managing to portray them as what Martin F. Norden calls “obsessive avengers” or monstrously vindictive figures whose desire to be abled-bodied resulted in angry outbursts and violent revenge (113).

While films of this nature are now regarded as exploitative, it remains difficult to find positive representations of disabled identity, let alone literal narratives of learning to live with disability. Within this reality, the emergence of the *Iron Man* films offered an initial promise of a big budget, popular cinematic look into the experience of a figure whose movement from ableness to injury warranted the possibility of an allegorical and filmic look into the disabled body on film. Yet, the *Iron Man* franchise, despite having a character whose body is physically altered and limited after an accident, pulls from the tropes of disabled filmic bodies without ever truly engaging with the disempowerment tied to becoming less than able. Within *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), along with *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), viewers are provided with a superhero narrative that alludes to disability, establishing Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) as a new form of heroism that appropriates disability tropes only to simultaneously undercut them with Stark’s refusal to accept anything but normative able-bodiedness. In the Marvel comic books, Stark, after a life-threatening wound, relies on his Iron Man armour for survival. However, in the film, Stark is not depicted as debilitingly disabled, furthering the franchise’s evocation yet rejection of disability. In the film, after his accident, Stark’s privilege remains intact and never reflects the immobility and trapped feelings attached to a representative cinematic treatment of disability. The films, as such, become a study of disability denial, reaffirming its social otherness by the ways in which Stark navigates the films, culminating in his impossibly instantaneous removal

of his own injury at the end of *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013). Beginning with Stark’s constant marginalization of all things ‘other,’ and moving towards an attachment to the hyper-abledness and masculine privilege afforded Stark within his Iron Man suit, what could have been a proactive and exploratory disability narrative is undermined. Instead, the franchise becomes a reminder that heroics and power necessitate hegemonic privilege – a particular irony, considering that superhero films, by their very nature, purport to protect and advocate those without the ability to do so.

Applying an understanding of disability to the *Iron Man* films requires explanation. Understanding disability to mean, as defined by the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), any “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of [an] individual,” one can begin to glean such a representation within the *Iron Man* franchise, particularly since the titular character’s non-able existence comes by way of accident.¹ Stark, a weapons manufacturer and admitted “merchant of death,” is kidnapped and near-fatally injured during an attack by the terrorist faction “The Ten Rings” while on a military weapons demonstration in Afghanistan. To keep the shrapnel embedded in Stark’s heart from killing him, fellow captive Yinsen (Shaun Toub) creates an electromagnet that keeps the shards inches away from penetrating his heart. At this point, Stark thinks he has lost everything, until he realizes that previously quelled research into his arc reactor energy technology might help him create a suit of armor that would allow him to escape the imprisonment, while also protecting him from his life-threatening disability.

Considering that the only visual signifier Stark has of his injury is his glowing chest piece, one might be hesitant to embrace this as disability, but as Susan Wendell notes, disability does not merely necessitate the visible, considering that forms of disability such as blindness are not immediately obvious (828). As such, Stark should be a figure of non-visible disability, because as the aforementioned ADA definition and Wendell’s arguments suggest, it is not a matter of looking disabled, but becoming impaired from previously accessible spaces and points of access. This understanding is particularly worth noting as Stark, while still privileged, is initially disenfranchised from his previously able-bodied activities (he is forced to carry around a car battery powering the electromagnet in his chest). The cave he is imprisoned

1. Distinguished from the ‘disability by accident’ narrative of *Iron Man* are the other possible considerations of the disabled ‘other’ within the Marvel filmic universe via the X-Men, whose mutant identities result in their own issues of social outcast status. However, their otherness is embraced as a gift, and its “linkage to exceptionality” carries a different, considerably less oppressive, weight than the “violence to the material” that signifies Stark’s disability, one that he constantly strives to undo through mechanized alteration (Bérubé 569).

in proves metaphoric for this immobility. Furthermore, it is not the suit that indicates Stark's possible disability (proving to be a prosthetic extension of his own masculine power) but his arc reactor, working much like a pacemaker, that proves his point of able-bodied limitation. This serves as a central issue within *Iron Man 2*, when the very item that is intended to save his life also doubles as a threat to it. The arc reactor becomes a time bomb of sorts, as nuclear poisoning invades Stark's blood. It is a reminder that Stark's reactor could be his very demise, as the physical sickness it causes becomes something Stark must work to negate.

It is in this relationship to the body and sickness that one can better understand the cinematic assumptions of Stark's disability as a sickness upon his body through an allusion to disability. In her work on body excess in genre film, Linda Williams discusses the ways in which bodies, particularly gendered ones, function in the genres of horror, pornography, and melodrama. While melodrama, as Williams notes, is often attached to "weepies," she explains that much of the narrative friction comes from female characters being "'afflicted' with a deadly or debilitating disease" (3-4). The extension of this consideration to the violent acts occurring within horror films, another genre of excess within Williams' article, makes the figure of Stark particularly interesting. His masculine body has become a point of disease through violence, pulling from a trope of disability, as well as a genre schema of near-fatal debilitation in line with a Classical Hollywood melodrama. Stark does not acknowledge such disabilities, but instead uses his privilege and eventually his Iron Man suit as a means to renavigate his identity, denying his debilitation through technology, and subsequently using his wealth and access to remove the shrapnel with no consequence to his body. Indeed, Stark's miraculous healing falls in line with the melodrama, where his disabled body could stand in for otherness, but ultimately fails to. It instead serves as a thing to reject and vilify. Genesis Downey posits that it is the very "reiterative" nature of blockbusters in relation to the Williams' notion



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of genre excess that results in such an occurrence. The *Iron Man* franchise is one such example that reminds viewers that, through such reiteration, it cannot be a positive disability narrative ("The Blockbuster as Body Genre").

Martin F. Nordon, in his book *Cinema of Isolation*, defines a series of character tropes to distinguish what he believes to be the various narratives that emerge within the history of disability in film. Of the various identities mentioned, two are of note regarding the *Iron Man* franchise. The first, the "obsessive avenger," is of particular interest to Stark's identity, as it represents a figure who desires to make their power known despite disability, often through aggression. In Nordon's definition, the avenger is usually a villainous adult male. The obsessive avenger is also an "egomaniacal sort [...] who does not rest until he has had his revenge on those he holds responsible for his disablement" (52). While no villain, Stark does embody the egomaniacal aspects of the obsessive avenger, a relationship that is most fitting considering his own membership within the titular heroic team of *The Avengers*. With the group of heroes, Stark constantly asserts his presence upon those around him, vindictively competing against a demigod, as though his arc reactor and threat of immediate immobility necessitate justifying his equality to the other Avengers. Of equal consideration is Stark's own 'moral code' and understanding of his power in regards to the other members of the group, notably his refusal to be one of Fury's (Samuel L. Jackson) soldiers, another factor key to Nordon's understanding of the obsessive avenger (52). It is in this threat of vengeance that Stark's particular disability becomes intriguing. Prior to *The Avengers*, Stark is deemed "hostile" in regards to working with others, yet, seems instinctively closer to Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) than he does Thor (Chris Hemsworth) or Captain America (Chris Evans). It is in the very nature of both of their accident-based movements towards heroic selves that seems to push forth in their unity. Banner turning into the Hulk when enraged reflects a variant of disability that is based within anxiety. As a hero whose power is predicated upon a mechanized device which also serves a life-sustaining function, Stark possesses an obsession for vengeance in line with Nordon's



notion; however, this vengeance is exacted under the guise of heroics, making his particular super hero narrative reflect another aspect of Nordon's disabled identity tropes.

A considerable portion of the first *Iron Man* film focuses on Stark coming to grips with being Iron Man, accepting that, within the embrace of his suit, he can serve as a heroic presence that can attain a popular status. Upon his return from imprisonment in the caves of Afghanistan, Stark initially masks his injury from Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) and Agent James Rhodes (Terrence Howard) in a sort of shame that doubles as Stark passing as abled. This act is indicative of an individual attempting to suppress disability.² This passing proves more difficult as Stark finds himself in situations where he and his Iron Man suit are prominently displayed – when fighting Air Force jets, and more so when he confronts Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges) in the city streets. In the closing moments of the first film, Stark states, “the truth is... I am Iron Man,” taking on the status and adoration that comes with the moniker. In doing so, Stark appropriates Nordon's notion of the “civilian superstar” identity. As Nordon explains, the civilian superstar represents a disabled figure whose lack becomes a point of dismissal in their ability to prove socially functional (ie: if one is crippled they cannot work in labour fields). Nevertheless, said figure proves capable of overcoming adversity to save the day and, in most instances, the life of a

2. Stark's passing as abled, evokes imagery of Franklin D. Roosevelt who, despite permanent disability due to polio, planned speeches and engagements in such ways as to avoid confrontations with his wheelchair-bound self and the public, fearing such a revelation would result in his being deemed unfit to run a country during war. Carol Poore suggests that Roosevelt's act served doubly to “exude self-confidence,” while also “avoid[ing] disrupting visual expectation[s] of body normalcy” (67).

fully abled-bodied person (28). As such, Stark becomes a civilian superstar, evidenced in his embrace of the heroic identity one that comes with fandom, including images of children donning Iron Man masks in *Iron Man 2* and *The Avengers*. However, his heroic status is at odds with his obsessive avenger identity, wherein his need to prove hyper-functional results in various occasions where he must fight other heroes and allies purely to assure his worth and retain his privilege. This reflects the larger issue of Stark's desire to completely deny the very disability with which he is obsessed.

The pre-accident Tony Stark is incredibly privileged, as is evidenced by his penthouse lifestyle and constant demeaning of those who he sees as less than himself. Indeed, the franchise takes no time establishing Tony Stark as suave, as his witty one-liners and laid back attitude are admired by the soldiers escorting him through the Afghanistan desert. Stark is dismissive of bodies that contradict his normative male self, as, prior to his accident, Stark is the “self” in regards to all forms of otherness. His form of hyper-masculinity paired with his whiteness and wealth cause him to adorn a “cool cynicism” that extends to considerations of othering in mainstream cinema, wherein male, “white cool” reestablishes a dominant hegemony that affirms all forms of oppression are “here to stay” (hooks 47). Stark, seemingly inclined to reaffirm such dichotomies, interacts with forms of non-normative identity with flippant irreverence, as when he mocks a female soldier for her masculine features and hires pole dancers for an airplane ride. Indeed, both Stark's whiteness and willingness to look at the world through male privilege would assumedly change after his accident, considering that he is now less-abled, if not disabled. This is not the case though, as Stark continues to

exude his privileged understanding of the world, now entrenched almost entirely in his wealth and technological prowess, as a means to continue his identity as the normative self, overlooking and knowingly stifling any potential for a disabled and therefore othered identity.

Jane Gaines posits that mainstream cinematic representations “locat[e]” themselves within a “masculine point of view,” wherein “locating the opposite” becomes more difficult when such a representation moves away from the traditional power-oriented and masculinized notion of the self (60). Understanding the nature of intersectionality and theories of oppression, disability could certainly fall within the parameters. Of particular note, however, is Gaines’ suggestion that film “privilege[s] the position (the gaze) of the male character(s) within the film” (64). Stark, as an extension of the viewer, serves as a body, who, despite his own existence within the spectrum of disability tropes, exists as a filmic figure whose embodiment as a white, masculine figure is predicated on promoting selfhood in juxtaposition to the other. These notions are constantly reinforced by his two closest relationships with Potts and Rhodes, both of whom Stark patronizes and ignores advice from, coding these relationships with clear power dynamics. As such, both find themselves at odds with Stark’s “white” hipness, particularly when Stark maintains such manners during bouts with villains, exacting oppressive actions in a physically violent manner.

Assuming Stark’s power comes from his class-based privilege, he can essentially function as a superhero not because of physical prowess or some mutant power, but from sheer financial privilege. As such, he must constantly affirm his wealth-based privilege when positioned against those

whose power or authority is not predicated upon financial capital. Whether it be the decadent Stark Expo showing off his newly created suits, or his wealth of robots and luxury vehicles, Stark is capable of suppressing the stigma attached to his injury through an accruing of consumer objects, ones that incidentally double as mechanical. This becomes particularly troubling when the condemnation is extended to those whose actions are as well-intentioned as Stark’s, but without his financial mobility. For example, Stark often condemns Rhodes’ reliance on military protocol as a fault, an interaction extended when he reminds the soldiers escorting him in Afghanistan that it is indeed “cool” to be photographed with him, despite his popularity being afforded only through his having inherited a billion dollar weapons manufacturing company. This othering through class occurs quite often within *The Avengers*, wherein Stark ridicules his fellow superheroes, particularly Captain America, as moral simpletons, deeming Captain America’s particular push towards justice as decidedly – albeit literally – antiquated. It would appear as though Stark’s condemnation of other heroes, in the form of soldiers, is one of class-based hesitance, dismissing Captain America, Rhodes, and, in *Iron Man 3*, disabled veterans. It is thus worthwhile to consider how Stark navigates his privilege when the very suit that allows him power becomes replicated without the arc reactor working as protection to their bodies.

Accepting that Stark is suspicious of other bodies than his, masculinity becomes a decided point of power, as well as a something that is at odds with other bodies, particularly when said bodies possess the same suit which Stark’s wealth has manifested. The suit moves beyond its function to protect Stark’s arc reactor, and becomes a means to re-





assert his masculine authority in the face of abled-bodied people. In *Iron Man 2*, Stark's civilian superstar status is appropriated by the American government hoping for Stark's aid in creating the next level in warfare by using a variant on the Iron Man suit to create War Machine, a metallic exoskeleton for Rhodes (Don Cheadle). The film also focuses on former Russian nuclear Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke) exacting revenge upon Stark for a feud between their fathers during the Cold War. Vanko and Rhodes arguably serve as divisions of Stark's obsessive avenger and civilian superstar status. To reassert his masculinity, Stark must create a dynamic that places him above his other masculine able-bodied competitors, who also wear armoured suits. This results in the film becoming one of psycho-sexual confrontation, wherein disability allegory falls to the wayside in favor of phallic power confrontations. Indeed, borrowing from Vivian Sobchack, one can understand Stark's suit as a certain form of prosthesis, filling in for "what has been left behind" (208). Here the mobility it affords is one of admiration and power, not debilitating loss; therefore it does not cause Stark to question what he has lost post-accident, particularly in the way of livelihood. However, the addition of the equally armoured Rhodes and Vanko (earlier Obadiah Stane) to this equation demands that Stark establish himself as an equal body in ableness while too appropriating his prosthetic lack. This proves particularly necessary when a semi-armoured Vanko, equipped with arc reactor-powered whips, attacks Stark at a Monaco racetrack. During this attack, Stark is barely able to piece together his suit in time to brace himself for the flailing attacks of Vanko's whips, and is depicted as helpless against this phallic attack. This calls attention to the necessity of his prosthetic suit and the simultaneous safety and power it affords.

It is necessary here to take an aside and consider the issues with the *Iron Man* franchise's seeming willingness to place the entirety of technology embodiment within masculine privilege, as it does help to further understand why Stark later rejects such figures whose own lack and disability could reflect his previous lack. Donna Haraway advocates in "A Cyborg Manifesto" that a cyborg ("a hybrid of machine and organism") affords society a chance to move beyond the dichotomous self/other space into a narrative slippage where "ambiguity" is embraced and "border[s]" are rejected.

To Haraway, the cyborg body, both machine and human, exists in a "post-gender world" (149-151). This is notable because the Iron Man suits, by covering the body of Stark, necessitate a cyborg status. Nonetheless, Stark and the others who don the suits still exert masculinity, whether it be through boxing matches or by denoting the suits as things "to be used" by male characters.³ The wholly embodying nature of the suits becomes interesting in the ways they welcome separation from other mechanized bodies by their very composition as suits and not bodies unto themselves. In another scene during *Iron Man 2*, Vanko takes control of Rhodes' War Machine armor by computer, effectively using Rhodes as a puppet to attack Stark. This reflects the idea of the militarized body as a "phallic muscle," one whose "manhood" is exerted and "flex[ed]" to verify superiority (Masters 118). Noting the political layer in the Russian Vanko's control over the sexual "muscle" of the American military, the scene suggests that Stark, who uses his Iron Man armor as prosthesis, can only be bested by his own technology. This equally reminds viewers that, even in a push towards cyborg-based warfare, masculinity is privileged as the ideal, negating Haraway's hopes for a genderless cyborg future.

However, reinforcement of Stark's Iron Man suit as the ideal affords him definitive masculine power, differentiated from the bulky replica armours constructed by Stane and Vanko. Indeed, when Rhodes and Stark join forces to take down Vanko, the two extend their phallic weaponry, an extension of Stark's own prosthesis, towards one another with Vanko in the middle. The two shoot orgasmic "repulsor ray" energy beams at Vanko in a techno-sexual celebration of their masculine ability, while also suggesting that their masculine power is privileged and somehow different, regardless of Stark's still ailing body and the decay occurring via the arc reactor and nuclear poisoning. It is in this moment that Stark moves out of the space of obsessive avenger – first to destroy a villain, but also to suggest that his own threat of death and possible disability are different than the non-abled in a more traditional sense, and not worthy of condemnation. This occurrence doubles with his already dismissive attitude towards those he sees as other, explaining how, by the end of *Iron Man 3*, Stark is capable of destroying literal disabled bodies.

Iron Man 3 finds Stark traumatically altered by his near death experience battling aliens in *The Avengers*, and suffering heavily from insomnia and post-traumatic stress disorder. As such, the third film becomes about Stark removing the threatening disempowerment that usually comes with disability. In the closing moments of the film, Stark unceremoniously has the shrapnel removed from his chest, leaving him to move free about the world, while out-

3. While Potts does briefly wear the Iron Man armour in *Iron Man 3*, it is only by the extension of Stark using it to protect her from injury.

By the closing of Iron Man 3, Stark has removed the shrapnel from his chest along with the threat of disempowerment he fought wildly to suppress. He finds no moral conflict in destroying disabled bodies, but instead sees them as dangerous and inhumane.

side of his Iron Man suit. While Stark and the *Iron Man* films have never openly affirmed his disability, they make considerable note of his healing. Mattingly and Lawlor articulate “healing dramas” as comforting, and suggest a “fleeting” quality to all forms of unhealthiness, contrasting the reality where “healing” often “falters or fails” (54). This is illustrated in Stark’s instantaneous removal of his shrapnel. Glasser, like Mattingly and Lawlor, posits that filmic narratives of recovery must look to move away from an is/is not dichotomy, whether it be through recovery or through death (9-14). Interestingly, while the *Iron Man* franchise shies away from labeling Stark as disabled, it does rely on a “healing” narrative to round out *Iron Man 3*, because doing so reminds viewers, and Stark, of what ‘could have’ been his fate.

The third film also focuses on Stark’s confrontations with Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce), a scientist whose definitive disability has led him to create the ‘Extremis’ procedure, a thermo-nuclear treatment that causes the human body to morph and become malleable, replacing limbs in a similar fashion to plants. Killian finds many of his subjects within a pool of war veterans, verified with graphic images showing men and women who are burned or missing limbs. The methodology implemented by Killian proves hazardous, leading all subjected to such treatments to become uncontrollably prone to spontaneous combustion. These bodies represent a more tangible obsessive avenger, as they are veterans whose injuries have led them to seek treatment that happens to make them hyper-able, as well as enraged. While the disabled bodies under Killian’s sway are shown



through a brief video montage expounding on their frustrations as disabled ‘others,’ little is shown to suggest their anger rooted in anything but villainy. These disabled figures, unlike Stark, affirm the stigma attached to such an identity, therefore creating the very contrast Stark requires to justify their destruction. Indeed, their otherness is not pitied by Stark but made a fiery monstrosity to be destroyed. The technologically savvy Stark is able to hold his threat of disability in sharp contrast to those genetically mutated and disabled, making his otherness less non-normative. This allows Stark to comfortably use his prosthetic Iron Man suit, free from the threat of other masculine cyborg bodies, alongside Rhodes, Potts, and numerous unmanned armours of Stark’s design, to destroy the Extremis-powered war veterans and eventually Killian. In a coup-de-grâce, Stark is able to appropriate his masculinity through his prosthesis to destroy the last reminder of his own possible disablement. At no point does *Iron Man 3* certify the previously human status of Killian and the Extremis soldiers, because to do so would be to negate Stark’s own points of privilege. The act should read antithetical to something attributed to the civilian superstar, but, given the narratively accepted villainy of these extremely disabled bodies, doubled with Stark’s healing from the threat of loss, he remains heroic, if not more so than before. In terms of Nordon’s tropes, the final version of Stark is neither a superstar, nor an avenger, but instead what one might call a post-disabled oppressor.

By the closing of *Iron Man 3*, Stark has removed the shrapnel from his chest along with the threat of disempowerment he fought wildly to suppress. He no longer finds any moral conflict in destroying disabled bodies, but instead sees them as dangerous and inhumane. Now comfortable with the benefits afforded him by his new suit, Stark uses the very armor that helped him to avoid a loss as a means of superhero identity. Yet, when tossing away his arc reactor, Stark claims that his “armor was never a distraction,” but a “cocoon.” This cocoon, as it were, is very much a distraction for Stark, who used the Iron Man suit as a means to negate the possibility of a disenfranchised body. The franchise further averts what could have been a consideration of Stark’s disability by placing his character within a point of privilege and using the Iron Man suit not as a reconsidera-

tion of body identity, but as a technological extension of masculinity, one that uniquely privileges Stark, even when appropriated by other bodies. Stark is somewhat correct in terming the armor a cocoon, as it suggests a narrative of metamorphosis that occurs within the trilogy. However, the change is not an evolution, but a movement between degrees of masculinity, one that begins as an able-bodied figure and ends as a hyper-abled one. The notion of disability between both identities is supplanted and the threat to Stark's well-being seems as though it was never intended to be permanent. Viewers are expected to share in Potts' understanding of why Stark does not "want to give up his [his] suit," because to do so would be to acknowledge that he was momentarily less than physically perfect, now made all the more privileged through his suit. The Iron Man suit allows for Stark, and the franchise, to cocoon the disabled narrative from public spectacle, just as the franchise's reliance on an able-bodied ideal cocoons viewers from acknowledging any disabled figure as heroic.

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