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# **(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness**

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**Abstract** *This article engages with the contemporary crisis of American identity and how the narratives of the Trump presidency are visually negotiated in the digital world. The Marvel Comics character Captain America has accompanied American identity constructions, crises, and discourses on US foreign policy for almost 80 years. Thus, it is no surprise that Captain America is again popular at a time of increased national crisis, made ever more present as a core character in the major feature film productions of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In the digital space, Captain America occupies a crucial political position as an easily identifiable visual carrier of identities and values that correspond with the public's concerns. This article interrogates how the circulation of visual narratives of Captain America on Twitter and other digital platforms contributes to a broader discourse about the essence of American identity, values and true 'Americanness' against the backdrop of a fragmented and polarised nation. While (Captain) America's search for the truthful narrative remains futile, understanding this futility can help to discover the discursive reasons for the contemporary crisis.*

**Keywords:** US Foreign Policy; International Relations; National Identity; Captain America; Popular Culture

## Introduction

*'Captain America: Donald Trump is "Putin's puppet"'* (BBC 2018).

This BBC News headline from 17 July 2018 was published online a day after US President Donald Trump met Russian premier Vladimir Putin at a controversial summit meeting in Helsinki. At the joint summit press conference, Trump criticised his own intelligence services over alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, saying instead that he believed the Russian leader's claims of innocence. Trump was heavily criticised immediately by a variety of politicians and pundits, both from the left and the right. Former CIA Director John O. Brennan, already a staunch critic of Trump, condemns the president on Twitter, implying he should be impeached:

Donald Trump's press conference performance in Helsinki rises to & exceeds the threshold of "high crimes & misdemeanor." It was nothing short of treasonous. Not only were Trump's comments imbecilic, he is wholly in the pocket of Putin. Republican Patriots: Where are you?? (@JohnBrennan 2018<sup>1</sup>)

Among this chorus of condemnation, one tweet stood out from the rest and led to the BBC News story headline. Actor Chris Evans, who plays Captain America in the Marvel Cinematic Universe film series, accused President Trump of not being tough enough towards his Russian counterpart, calling him a *puppet* of Russia. Next to the BBC, several other media outlets reported and retweeted the repeated criticism by 'Captain America' (Cocksedge 2018; Miner and Nichols 2018; McCaffrey 2018). Even though Trump quickly backtracked from his Helsinki statement, his remarks were fiercely debated across social and traditional media and discussed as either one of two mutually exclusive things: an act of treason seen as a long-term obstacle to the pursuit of US national interest or a deft diplomatic stroke designed to ease tensions with Putin's Russia. The claims for either one of these two perceptions were supported digitally by a creative range of images, memes, or gifs, many of which followed established digital patterns of spreading virally across platforms. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the reference points were wide and varied, including classic superhero film sources such as General Zod in *Superman II* (1980).



**Figure 1.** Comparing the Helsinki summit between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump to tennis and football. *Source:* <https://twitter.com/rohantwyman/status/1019052917972537344>

**Figure 2.** Reference to *Superman II* (1980). *Source:* <https://twitter.com/Malacandra/status/1019017844007161857>

<sup>1</sup> JohnBrennan, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/JohnBrennan/status/1018885971104985093>>

The online reactions indicate a series of interesting phenomena. We can see how polarised the debate about Trump and national unity has continued to be since the 2016 presidential election campaign, when Trump and his Democratic rival, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, occupied two seemingly irreconcilable camps. The two camps were and still are very much split along the lines of whether Trump is a catastrophic anomaly that seeks to dismantle everything America stands for or, on the contrary, a president who will 'Make America Great Again'. Furthermore, the incident demonstrated how political arenas are changing. At least since the so-called 'Arab Spring', we can see a shift opening up digital spaces for the negotiation of resistance, identities and ideologies: 'Social media are now a central component of diplomacy. From "digital diplomacy" as the new public diplomacy to cyberspace as the new frontier of warfare, information communication technology is an inescapable tool of international relations' (Duncombe 2017, 561). This shift in the way political issues are negotiated in digital spaces has not been identified as something good or bad per se but can rather be seen as yet another arena in which representation and power but also critique and – as seen above – even mockery can take place. In this sense: 'Digital media has further expanded the sites at which popular culture manifests and blurred the lines even further between the cultural, the political and the popular' (Shepherd and Hamilton 2016, 5).

This article builds upon the debate concerning popular digital culture and argues that the contemporary crisis within narratives of *Americanness* is being played out significantly in the digital space and is driven by many different political players, particularly those within the realm of popular culture. The circulation of the tweets and images of Evans, aka Captain America, further demonstrates an increase of political voices while his popularity as an actor might give him a specific form of credibility. First, I will outline key aspects of popular digital culture and crisis narratives, then I will position Captain America within these debates. Second, I will analyse how Captain America can help us navigate our way through (existential) crisis negotiated in digital spaces. Fundamentally, I argue that the analysis of the visual narratives created by digital representations of Captain America can help to understand how the contemporary crisis of American identity is negotiated (Giroux 2017; Hawley 2018). Ultimately, Captain America underpins the crisis of American identity enhanced through the Trump presidency and renders the search for *true Americanness* futile because unlike being something historically fixed and therefore retrievable, American identity has always been in flux and contested in a similar way as 'Cap' himself.

### Popular Digital Culture and Crisis

I will elaborate the specific role of popular digital culture and why it is a useful tool to look at what I diagnose as an American crisis. Research on popular digital culture has pointed out how social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram can be used by political elites and actors such as the military, in order to pursue a specific agenda (Crilly 2016; Jackson 2016). Yet another aspect of these developments is that social media serves as a platform not only for the voice of a few privileged elites but of virtually anyone who wants to engage (Takacs 2015). In this sense, popular digital culture might serve as a democratised form of culture as it enables the contributions, negotiations, and sharing of political messages. In the context of US foreign policy, this suggests a wide variety of people globally who are using social media platforms to share their views. While the consumption of and engagement with digital spaces on the one hand and popular culture on the other are quite often seen as mundane (Edensor 2002) or harmlessly set in the everyday (Highfield 2016), it is the very site of social interaction and knowledge, epitomising what Chadwick describes as a hybrid system in which '...older and newer media logics in the fields of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh, and coevolve' (Chadwick 2013, 5). If TV allows us to become '...armchair travellers' (Barker 1999, 7), in the sense that audiences are immersed in visual entertainment and can thus experience the political culture of others, then surely this applies even more so in the age of social media. Stocchetti and Kukkonen further argue that visual communication is so powerful because '...it binds the viewer in a communicative relation where agency is hidden and meaning is ambivalent' (2011, 4).

The dissemination of memes, gifs, and images via social media contributes to the visual orientation of popular digital culture. While Jonathan Dean diagnoses the 'memefication of politics' (Dean 2018, 4), memes can also be seen as popular cultural artefacts, involved in dissemination, replication and imitation (Yao 2016). The reduction of politically complex issues to visual cues makes content understandable more quickly and, consequently has an effect on the potential virality of content. The rise of social media and the surge of on-demand streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime demonstrate an increased

accessibility and availability in how images are disseminated, exchanged, reproduced, altered, and thrown back into a process of endless digital circulation. At the moment, we can observe a crisis of different political narratives and the widespread sense that something fundamental within US national identity has collapsed. This debate feeds into a broader discourse about the natural and essential character of *Americanness*, which Cynthia Weber describes as ‘...performatively, affectively and visually...’ (Weber 2014, 51) constructed and contested. In this sense, images can be seen as sites for the control of values within society (Herkman 2011; Kukkonen 2011).

I understand crisis as a social construction that ought to be discursively shaped and implemented in the everyday. This is not to say that there are no material consequences or expressions of crisis. Baker, for example, analyses the socio-economic reasons of American crises while recognising that crisis hinges on the perception of a crisis of values and ‘...the division of America into two opposed moral camps’ as well as ‘...a threat to the imagined community of America’ (Baker 2006, 17). Similarly, Stuart Croft sees crisis ‘...at the origins of the American state’ (Croft 2006, 6), tracing different crisis discourses from Thomas Paine to George W. Bush. On the one hand, crisis displays a deep-seated element within the American nation. On the other hand, there are specific moments of crisis that are discursively narrated and created in different and heightened ways such as the Civil War, the World Wars, Watergate, Vietnam and September 11 (Croft 2006; Holland 2009; McCrisken 2003; Muller 2017).

This feeling of an endemic crisis of *Americanness* under Trump is reflected by a variety of political observers, such as Robert Kagan, who argues that in foreign affairs, Trump is ‘...destroying the trust and sense of common purpose that have held [America] together and prevented international chaos for seven decades’ and that he exploits ‘...the great disparities of power built into the postwar order, at the expense of the United States’ allies and partners’ (2018). Others within the conservative camp voice concern over how ‘Trump’s flakiness is destroying America’s credibility’ (Rubin 2018) and neo-Realist scholar Stephen Walt says that ‘America can’t be trusted anymore’ (2018). On the left, Noam Chomsky argues that Trump is ‘a threat to organized human life’ (2018). Michael Wolff’s *Fire and Fury* asserts in its very first sentence that ‘the United States entered the eye of the most extraordinary political storm since at least Watergate’ (2018, ix). Accordingly, I see the crisis unfolding before our eyes to be understood as a contemporary moment in American history, exacerbated through the election of Donald Trump as US president. After the summit in Helsinki between Putin and Trump, Captain America actor Chris Evans tweeted two consecutive tweets on 16 July 2018:

This moron, puppet, coward sided with Putin over our own intelligence agencies! On a world stage!! BASED ON NOTHING MORE THAN PUTIN’S WORD! Why?? Can ANYONE answer that?? What the hell is happening. Politics aside, this is 100% un-American. Where are you @GOP???? (@ChrisEvans 2018a<sup>2</sup>)

I don’t even know what to say. Today was a disgrace. @realDonaldTrump embarrassed America and should be ashamed of himself. Shame on anyone who chooses to ignore Russia’s interference in our democracy for the sake of Trump’s political well-being. I’m at a complete loss. (@ChrisEvans 2018b<sup>3</sup>)

Both tweets enjoyed immense popularity and were liked and re-tweeted widely. In comparison, while Trump’s tweets usually receive a lot more comments, Evans’ second tweet (25000 re-tweets, 160000 likes) received more likes than 218 out of the 220 tweets by Trump in the second half of July 2018. Only one tweet out of Evan’s 13 tweets in the same period received more likes and re-tweets than his second Trump tweet. Tweets critical of Trump by political voices such as Bernie Sanders (D-VT) (11000 re-tweets, 49000 likes), Hillary Clinton (94000 re-tweets, 370000 likes) and John McCain (R-AZ) (61000 re-tweets, 160000 likes) from 16 July 2018 demonstrate the outrage sweeping through social media. The dissemination of Evan’s tweets is thus interesting as he does not represent a primarily political voice. The involvement of celebrities in the political debate is nothing new but belongs to a broader political culture in the US. In the digital age, however, voices inside and outside of traditional political institutions can co-exist while wide audiences can participate in political debate as well. It has been argued that celebrity activity can fulfil a specific function in diplomacy (Constantinou 2018) and democratic politics since they act as ‘...everyday

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<sup>2</sup> ChrisEvans, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/ChrisEvans/status/1018952126788263940>>

<sup>3</sup> ChrisEvans, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/ChrisEvans/status/1018951916892639232>>

makers of politics' (Marsh, 't Hart and Tindall 2010, 328). The involvement of celebrities as interplay between popular culture and politics can also be seen as enhanced through social media (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaras 2011; Bergman Rosamond 2016).

The dissemination of images and texts then moulds a specific political discourse and renders these messages to some extent authorless and lacking traceable authenticity (Shepherd 2016). The thousands of comments that attached themselves to Evans' tweets quickly connected him to his role as Captain America and discussed his tweets through this cultural or filmic lens. Around a third of comments used memes and gifs in support of Evans, many of which featured Captain America. Around 25% of the 41,500 re-tweets mentioned the word 'Captain' (Trendsmat 2018a; Trendsmat 2018b). On the following pages I will conduct a textual and visual analysis of how Captain America functions as an intertext for the American crisis, that is to say, standing in relationship with other text's meaning (Dittmer 2010), starting with the two tweets by Evans and replies to his tweets. The presence of Captain America as a political symbol in digital spaces is at the forefront of the analysis.

### **The Myth of Captain America**

I will now briefly introduce Captain America and explain how he is tied to constructions of national American mythology and crisis in an American context. In their studies on the American Monomyth (Jewett and Lawrence 1977), both authors analyse how the notion of the superhero has always been part of American identity. The American tendency to highlight specific individuals as carriers of an alleged original, natural, and essential form of *Americanness* – from Washington to Jefferson to Lincoln to Franklin D Roosevelt to Kennedy to Reagan – is practised axiomatically and feeds into a specific national myth. Tracing this further back, they observe 'Washington's character as selfless saviour of the country and Lincoln's behaviour as the man who deliberately circumvented laws to serve a higher purpose. We see variations of these traits in every monomythic hero' (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 132). Bellah has noticed a religious dimension to American identity '...expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion' (2005, 42). It might seem paradoxical that superheroes are coming back at a time that might be seen as post-heroic and secular, but it is ultimately the digital age that frames American civil religion and identity around the myth of the superhero with a signifying function.

Further, Jewett and Lawrence identify two streaks of US foreign policy impulses that are connected to historical and biblical interpretations. The first one is zealous nationalism which 'seeks to redeem the world by destroying enemies'. The second one is prophetic realism which 'avoids taking the stances of complete innocence and selflessness. Prophetic realism seeks to redeem the world for coexistence by impartial justice that claims no favoured status for individual nations' (2003, 8). These two contradictory streams can be found throughout US foreign policy history. They are ultimately best epitomised by Captain America as he has embodied this ambivalence longer than any practising politicians have. At the same time, he incorporates these ambivalences into a credible and likeable personification of America.

Captain America has epitomised these myths ever since his first comic book appearance in 1941 and continuous presence in film and TV since 1944. Additionally, he has been celebrating Hollywood blockbuster success in a series of films starring Evans since 2011, starting with *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Jason Dittmer has described superheroes such as Captain America as '...co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices' (2013, 3). Captain America has not only a long tradition of literally embodying US national identity and the US flag in his persona and costume in Marvel comics, but also has now widened that appeal and impact on the silver screen, with Evans playing the character in three Captain America films (2011, 2014, 2016) and four Avengers films (2012, 2015, 2018, 2019), all produced by Disney's Marvel Studios. Captain America's first appearance occurred at a time when the US had to decide whether isolationism and neutrality were the right course of action or whether they wanted to engage in the war in Europe and against Japan; remember that Captain America went to war with Hitler more than 9 months before the US declared war on Germany. The character was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, two Jewish American writers; additionally, Steve Rogers only becomes Captain America with the help of a Jewish scientist and his super soldier serum. The (meta)textual creation of Captain America can thus be read as an anti-isolationist counter-narrative to more isolationist camps at the time (Scott 2011). Not only did the character anticipate US foreign policy, the

image underpinned an element of a debate that was already discursively present within the broader context of US foreign policy making. He has remained in the public consciousness of Americans and international audiences ever since and has been repeatedly reinvented (Murray 2000; Hassler-Forrest 2012).

The narratives surrounding Captain America, for a long time mostly played out in comic books, display the move from the fight against Nazism to Communism (and his appearance as the Commie Smasher in the 1950s) and later on terrorism. He further entertains strong relations with a variety of other Marvel characters, such as Iron Man, Spider-Man, Black Widow, or Hulk. For example, his relationship to Black Panther introduced on screen in the film *Black Panther* (2018) is important because it juxtaposes American and African identities and, thus, displays different discourses and imaginaries on race and empire (Saunders 2018).

Captain America himself experiences identity crises periodically, for example by losing his pride of being American, turning into *Nomad*, the man without country, as a reaction to Watergate, or *The Captain* at the end of the 1980s (Dittmer 2013; Dubose 2007), two turns that are also visible in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Dittmer sees Captain America as a space of legitimation and analyses the paralleling of re-occurring debates (or crises) of American identity and the publication of comic books. As he argues, ‘... just as the character of Captain America undergoes personal change and crisis alongside major conflicts in the comic book, America goes through periodic bouts of self-questioning and doubt (Dittmer 2007, 258). Further, Captain America serves as a bridge between nostalgia and contemporary complexities (Brown 2017; Goodrum 2016). The crisis-proneness of the character also plays out in the way that his masculinity is conceived of. His journey from being unfit for service to becoming the super soldier is formative for his identity, as well as the adoption of his uniform and shield, representing his ability to protect the American nation. These foundations of his identity are questioned in times of crisis which then also question his masculinity (for example along the question whether he can still protect). This feeds into what some have analysed as political crisis and discourses on masculinity being inherently intertwined (Jeffords 1989; Faludi 2007), an aspect that seems very topical during the Trump presidency.

The case of Evans and Captain America reinforces the political role of celebrities and, further, shows how the intertextual connections between the comics, the films, the *real* and the fictional character are not only blurred but that the different popular cultural artefacts overlap and play into one another (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009). This means that ‘...films have acquired a life that makes them so much more than a marker of attitude at a particular moment in time. They become temporally detached from their original release, seen again and again in different contexts by their original audiences’ (McCrisken and Moran 2018, 6) and through social media platforms also by people who have never read the comics or seen the films. Even more so, Captain America becomes an artefact with an aesthetic and narrative function and, ultimately, takes authorship over important features of crisis.

### **The Aesthetics of Captain America**

This section highlights the role of aesthetics and visibility for International Relations while also elaborating how Captain America serves as a visual and narrative embodiment of American values and discourses. This article draws on a growing body of literature that aims to explain and demonstrate the aesthetic (Bleiker 2001; Moore and Shepherd 2010; Weber 2006) and visual (Bleiker 2018; Holden 2006; Robinson and Schulzke 2016; Williams 2003) aspects that create, shape and constitute global politics. Not only do these approaches perceive the international as culturally and aesthetically established, but they also play into the broader debate on popular culture, not as being opposed to the real world but co-producing it (Croft 2006; Jackson 2005; Lisle 2003; Weldes 2003; Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009). As Der Derian argues, in the digital age, ‘war reaches not only into every living room but splashes onto every screen, TV, computer and cinema’ (2000, 775) while at the same time we ‘have entered a digitally-enhanced “virtual immersion,” in which instant scandals are all available, not just primetime and real-time but 24/7’ (2009, 218). Grayson, Philpott and Davies argue that rather than seeing world politics and popular culture as two different spheres, in opposition to each other, it is more accurate to view them as continuum and, ultimately, ‘...an important site where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised’ (2009, 155-156). In this context, Douglas Kellner sees in cultural expressions nothing less than ‘a contested terrain across which key social groups and competing political ideologies struggle for dominance and that

individuals live these struggles through the images, discourses, myths, and spectacles of media culture' (Kellner 1995, 2). Ultimately, narratives found in popular culture can '...tell us a lot about the limits and possibilities of political life, since they articulate particular worldviews, create and enable certain political subjects, and (re)produce specific understandings about facts, relations and peoples' (Moulin 2016, 138).

In the digital age, the circulation of images happens ever faster and all the time. This period of mediatisation of *reality* has opened the way for what Baudrillard described as *Hyperreality*, namely that *reality* and simulation become identical in the era of mass media. Concerning digital culture, Sebastian Kaempf talks about 'hyper-mediated reality' (Kaempf 2016, 114). Consequently, the seeming contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced (Baudrillard 1981, 1983). It is an era that also tells us something about authorship: literally any user of social media can manipulate and distribute images in different ways and contexts and, in doing so, contribute to a broader discourse. If we see world politics and popular culture as co-constitutive and images as a strong, omnipresent means to bridge the two, then the digital realm reveals itself to be the battleground for the future of ideologies, identities, and values.

Global politics has always been framed in and expressed through aesthetics and representation as well as notions of performativity and fantasy (Zulaika 2012). Hollywood's contribution to the American Cold War (Shaw 2007) demonstrates the importance of cultural industries in co-producing what we perceive as political *reality* and engaging in the question of who has the power to define, interpret and legitimise political action. Specific forms of myths and ideological formations are constantly produced in the face of crisis (McSweeney 2014) to such an extent that Hollywood is described as '...an indispensable bulwark of empire' (Boggs and Pollard 2016, 3). But the importance of images and narratives that Hollywood and other cultural agents produce has been extended (rather than subverted) by the emergence of digital spaces. This means that while the films and comics still produce these images, the digital age enables these images to become more and more immersed in their circulation online which then produces widely polysemic narratives and myths.

The US was, and is, prone to feel these cultural and historical rupture points, on a collective and individual level in strong connection to this set of myths. This is not surprising given the historical role the US has played for at least the past 100 years, and how cultural, technological and economic phenomena originating in the US acquire a global character. Tropes surrounding American exceptionalism, democracy, freedom, justice and liberty have traditionally been seen as high stakes, defended as essential and existential against any adversary to these values. As scholars have pointed out, narratives of global politics are often based on mythological and historical notions of national identity (Blieseman de Guevara 2016) and occur in specific discursive elements of US foreign policy (Paul 2014).

Captain America has been proving himself a great carrier of virtually all these mythologies, values, narratives, ideologies and identities over the course of the past almost 80 years. Starting with his first appearance in 1941, against the backdrop of Nazism in Europe and debates about whether the United States should intervene in the conflict, there was a deeper '...purpose of connecting this fictional person to the larger construct of American identity' (Dittmer 2005, 633). In his ability to link various complex issues together, for example individualism vs community, idealism vs status quo, or isolationism vs interventionism, he became more than just a piece of entertainment. Rather, he became '...a truth claim regarding the characteristics that define America against a backdrop of otherness' (Dittmer 2005, 633).

His long history in comic book appearances maintained his popularity and cultural resonance while his appearance in major Hollywood productions of recent years within the Marvel Cinematic Universe have broadened familiarity with his character and the meanings attached to it to an audience that stretches well beyond the borders of US territory. The design of the character, in the comics as well as in the films, demonstrates that beyond the usual set of superhero abilities, Captain America is also supposed to be visually recognisable as a symbol of *America*. His uniform embodies the colours of the US flag with its star and stripes motif, unambiguously connecting the character to US national identity. His link to *Americanness* is further underscored by the 'A' for America on his helmet. Another visual and ideological element that demonstrates the militarised nature of Captain America is his shield with its red, white and blue colouring and its prominent star. Even though he often uses his shield as an offensive weapon by throwing it at enemies before it returns to him, the shield is fundamentally a defensive device. In short, it symbolises the traditional understanding of US foreign policy makers to never act out of aggression but to emphasise protection and defence (Dittmer 2013). What we can see here is that the character of Captain America has



been established in previous decades as a carrier of narrative and visual cues, supported through the global market for merchandise and DVD sales (Brown 2017; Goodrum 2016). But the recognisable and comprehensive character outline, furthermore, makes him ideal for the dissemination in digital spaces. It might seem paradoxical that Captain America could be relevant to anyone outside of the US, but a closer look reveals a certain logic to it. If Captain America was designed to underpin US identity, then he can be read as an extension of US foreign policy, which is based on the exceptional belief of the US as *city upon a hill* on the one hand and the belief that America's values applied to the whole *free world* of which the US is ready to establish itself as leader (McCrisken 2003, 2).

### **Captain America and the Crisis of America(nness)**

In this section I will discuss how the crisis of the Trump presidency has been digitally and visually negotiated via Captain America, with specific focus on the increasing polarisation of the nation and the historical dimension of Captain America. In talking about crisis in the context of Trump, it is important not to insinuate that the division of American national identity is a new phenomenon, in any way a product of, or original to, the Trump presidency. The widespread feeling of an existential crisis of national identity had been brewing for many years but seemed to come to a head in the presidential campaign between Clinton and Trump that saw the business tycoon and reality TV star defeat the most seasoned and experienced political operative to run for the highest office in the US.

The *New York Daily News* cover from 9 November 2016, a day after the presidential elections, showed the White House and an upside-down US flag, writing 'House of Horrors [...] Trump seizes Divided States of America'. The front page of the same newspaper had an even more dramatic front page on 17 July 2018, the day after the Trump-Putin meeting in Helsinki. It showed Putin and Trump walking hand in hand down Fifth Avenue, in New York, with Trump shooting Uncle Sam in the head. The text declared in big letters 'Open Treason'. Both front pages indicate how critical the crisis has become. Changing the name from United to Divided States of America suggests a break within US history. Trump killing Uncle Sam as a personification of the United States itself and connecting the president to treason is yet another indication of how existential the situation is. The wrongfully displayed flag, the literal murder of a symbol of American military power, and the suggested Russian-American unity visually underscore the situation.

The academic community still seems to be digesting the Trump presidency, showing a massive surge of panels and papers about Trump at conferences such as the American Political Studies Association or the International Studies Association. **The ISA 2018 program mentioned Trump no less than 60 times. The APSA in 2017 featured 48 roundtables and panels about Trump in 2017 and 2018.** The written work that appeared in the last 18 months shared the view that the election meant a great upset of American democracy (Feldman 2017; Laderman and Simms 2017). As Kellner argues, Trump '...has developed a large following through his demagoguery and that authoritarian populism constitutes an American Nightmare, and a clear and present danger to US democracy and global peace and stability' (2016, 95).

Now, Captain America shows his presence at a time when US national unity and identity is at risk. The return of Captain America to the silver screen was part of a broader revival of the superhero genre by Hollywood and directly connected to '9/11' and Bush's 'War on Terror' (Hassler-Forest 2012; McSweeney 2018). While film reboots of Batman and Superman expressed the moral uncertainties and traumatic after-effects of '9/11' and the Bush presidency (Hassler-Forest 2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* presents the origin story of a long-standing Marvel character at the peak of Obama's presidency. Since then, the character experienced some changes that were displayed and discussed in digital spaces and were also visually noticeable due to the change of his uniform and looks.

The film *Captain America: Civil War*, which was released in May 2016, drew heavily on the Marvel Comics storyline with the same name (2006-2007) and displayed the internal struggle between the Avengers led by Iron Man on the one hand and Captain America on the other.<sup>4</sup> The reason for the split was the question

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<sup>4</sup> The Avengers are a superhero collective or team with changing members and associated characters. Most story arcs within the Marvel Cinematic Universe surround the Avengers and individual characters within it,

of whether superheroes and their actions should be subject to governmental control. The situation escalates when the group around Captain America refuses to agree to governmental regulation, leading to the Civil War.

The split between the two groups was used online and paralleled with the contemporary political situation. A month before the release of the film in April 2016, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* aired a parody trailer that featured Donald Trump as Iron Man, Bernie Sanders as Captain America and Hillary Clinton as Scarlet Witch. The trailer has since been removed from YouTube, but the visual connection between the film and the presidential campaign has been used for memes and images. The cinematic release of the film, coinciding with the presidential campaigns of 2016, goes hand in hand with the use of memes and gifs for political exchanges. Many of them have a mundane purpose, relating Captain America to a broader popular cultural background or using his image in a humorous way. But in many cases, Captain America is used as a political symbol. When the images relate to the presidential campaigns they are usually self-made memes that circulate on Facebook or Twitter without having a clearly identifiable author. Interestingly, there are conflicting interpretations of the role Captain America should obtain. On the one hand, the memes show Trump as Captain America, sometimes supported by the campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again.' On the other hand, there are multiple images that show Captain America confronting Trump and in many cases punching Trump in the face, imitating the visual from the first Captain America comic book issue from 1 March 1941 in which Captain America punches Hitler in the face. The first group assumes a connection between Trump and Captain America as *true* Americans, acting to promote the interests of America, visually uniting the two without any point of reference. The second group is doing the same but, by connecting Captain America to World War II and his fight against Hitler, they position the US and a positive notion of history against Trump as a fascist figure. This feeling of an endemic crisis in two opposing views of national identity only seems to have intensified since Trump's victory. The circumstances under which the election campaign was fought, that he lost the popular vote, and that election day itself displayed the peak of an intense and polarised campaign had long-lasting effects. This polarisation finds its continuation in digital spaces while the nature of social media facilitates access to formulating and sharing one's opinion. This competition of different opinions and narratives produces discursive sub-fields.

It does not come as a surprise that this division in American political discourse is still prevalent in 2018. Evans' tweets, sent consecutively on 16 July 2018, reveal a lot about the divisions that constitute the crisis. They take a notion of *our* democracy and position it vis-à-vis Russia as a foe. The same happens again when Evans talks about *our own* intelligence agencies. In both tweets, Evans voices concern about the international credibility of the US. He also moves *Americanness* into the field outside of politics, as if *Americanness* was something outside of political negotiation but rather something fixed, essential and unchangeable. He furthermore positions the intelligence agencies as being owned by the American people rather than being dependent on political decision makers such as the president, members of his administration or intelligence services directors.

Trump was also heavily criticised from the Republican side. Former Congressman Joe Walsh (R-IL) tweeted: 'When I was in Congress, I was one of its most conservative Members. But dammit, I'm an American first. And I'm furious that Russia screwed with our election. I'm furious that Russia attacked us. And I'm really furious that our President doesn't give a damn' (@WalshFreedom 2018<sup>5</sup>). As another critical voice on the right, long-time Republican Senator John McCain (R-AZ) tweeted: 'Today's press conference in #Helsinki was one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president in memory' (@SenJohnMcCain 2018<sup>6</sup>). Different political actors and prominent voices seemed united for a short moment in time. The outrage was coupled with the disappointment about Trump as an America president who could not defend his country but was also presumably handing national security to Putin. In various re-tweets, the calls for impeachment for treason were supported by images and memes, supporting the two

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such as Captain America, Iron Man, Spider-Man, Hulk, Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, Thor, Ant-Man and a variety of less popular characters.

<sup>5</sup> WalshFreedom, Twitter, 14 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/WalshFreedom/status/1018201440848932864>>

<sup>6</sup> SenJohnMcCain, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/SenJohnMcCain/status/1018919182904299520>>

politicians who were socialised during the Cold War and thus providing a specific frame of reference when thinking about American conduct towards Russia.

But the fierce debate about Trump's conduct was by far not primarily reduced to political voices. Evans' Twitter feed was yet another space where this debate took place. The critique on Trump foregrounds an assumed destruction or decline of the American nation (@DumonDUmon4 2018<sup>7</sup>; @BreakingBravoos 2018<sup>8</sup>). Another theme was the question of national security and protection; one comment argued that Trump 'was failing to protect the United States from a known foreign enemy. Clearly he's more interested in protecting himself than he is the country he's supposed to defend (*sic*)' (@twiddlebirdlet 2018<sup>9</sup>). As an extension, there are multiple comments speaking of embarrassment in front of the whole world and the destruction of the US as a whole. The *capitulation* or *decline of our country* seems to be attributed to the president alone. The crucial aspect here is that Trump is positioned on the other side of a spectrum that has *America* as a seemingly logical opposite without defining any of its features: "As far as I'm concerned, in America, you're either an American, or you're with Trump (@DavidSt42078741 2018<sup>10</sup>). Echoing the 2016 parody trailer, the digital film poster of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) was edited to fit the political polarisation; on the original poster, the left side is occupied by Captain America (held in blue) while the right side featured Iron Man (held in red). The confrontational situation is underlined by the question: 'Whose side are you on?' A modified version of the poster shows Clinton and Trump on either side and supported by the same question. Even people broadly unfamiliar with the specificities of the *Civil War* narrative can draw their conclusions, the question on whose side one is on becoming an existential one in a stand-off situation, drawing on anxieties of national insecurity and decline.

While some comments only featured images of Captain America in support of Evans, others featured memes that included direct political or historical references, for example, the fictional Nazi organisation Hydra in relation to Trump, putting him in a direct line with fascism (@DocEgonSpengler 2018<sup>11</sup>). Below Evans' second tweet one user posted a self-made caricature that imitates the Captain America-Hitler cover, with Trump taking Hitler's place (@Alma\_Cartoonist 2018<sup>12</sup>). In addition to the Nazi uniform, the symbol in the armband has changed from a swastika to a hammer and sickle. Here, Captain America is invoked as a representation of a specific historical constellation. The history of World War II as America's *good war*, and the belief in American values, is at the same time coupled with the understanding of the US as a global force for good. The narratives underlining this specific understanding of history are driven through images. This applies to photography and films from the actual conflict as well as their reproduction in a variety of popular American culture, which helped remove any ambivalent aspects of American World War II history (McCracken and Pepper 2005, 90). For a long time, Captain America represented the interventionist side of World War II history. The digital appearance of images that feature him appeal to this nostalgic understanding of what the US used to be. His uniform and military title stand out as features that instantly connect him to an unproblematic time while not reflecting potential ambivalence and problems of American history. Trump's narrative develops differently, seeing the US rather as returning to a role that is less benevolent and more openly self-interested. But what remains in the centre of the debate are American values as something linking '...America to the world. The belief that American values are *universal* values – that *all* men and women are created equal, that *all* are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, regardless of race, creed, or nationality – connects us to other nations' (Slaughter 2007, 7-8). In exaggerating the direct political link, some comments ask *Cap* to *suit up*

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<sup>7</sup> DumonDumon4, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/DumontDumont4/status/1018979060066738177>>

<sup>8</sup> BreakingBravoos, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/BreakingBraavos/status/1018953340418437120>>

<sup>9</sup> Twiddlebirdlet, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/twiddlebirdlet/status/1018953069432852480>>

<sup>10</sup> DavidSt42078741, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/DavidSt42078741/status/1019340639878590465>>

<sup>11</sup> DocEgonSPengler, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/DocEgonSpengler/status/1018952170849423360>>

<sup>12</sup> AlmaCartoonist, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <[https://twitter.com/Alma\\_Cartoonist/status/1019635834184720384](https://twitter.com/Alma_Cartoonist/status/1019635834184720384)>

to take on Trump or to run against him in 2020 (@JulieaQSmith 2018<sup>13</sup>; @Eric\_Kauffmann 2018<sup>14</sup>; @AaronJMitchell 2018<sup>15</sup>).

What is expressed in these tweets is not only the feeling of overwhelming helplessness, it also merges the spheres of contemporary politics and popular culture. What is suggested is that the suit and the shield would provide the required security that is lacking because of Trump's incompetence, weakness and treason. The visual reference to *Civil War* deepens the impression of a split nation. Another aspect is the historical dimension; the clear references to the fight of Captain America against National Socialism declares the current crisis an existential emergency, if not in an actual fight against a totalitarian other than at least in the fight for the survival of American identity. Further, positioning Trump as opposite of Americanness vaguely echoes George W. Bush's notion of being *either with us or with the terrorists*. The Manichean nature of Bush's rhetoric, as Douglas Kellner (2010) argues, has been anticipated and ultimately critiqued already in the new *Star Wars* trilogy and especially in *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

### Captain America's existential crisis

Building on the connections between Captain America, digital culture, and crisis, I will now connect the developing existential crisis to the broader aspects of American mythology. I will identify how Captain America functions, on the one hand, as a bipartisan figure while, on the other hand, he himself shifts into crisis.

Following the American Monomyth, individuals have long functioned as discursive representations that have found their way into collective historical memory. At the same time these historical figures have to be mythologised and fictionalised to a large extent. This is to say that there is barely anything real or tangible about how Washington or Lincoln are represented, and their political legacies negotiated. It is rather the case that many of their character traits are omitted or exaggerated, depending how they fit into the contemporary world. As such their fantastical character remains undecided and vague:

America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of a principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs (Baudrillard 1986, 76).

Captain America is thus negotiated as real as representations of Washington or Lincoln, and his advantage is that his whole character was designed to be recognisable and quickly identifiable; this holds even more so in the digital age. Baudrillard positions *Americanness* precisely between the two, assuming that 'America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too' (1986, 28).

Regarding the debate on Twitter, the few voices that spoke out against the interventions by Evans went straight against his person and not against the character he plays, describing him as *Captain anti-America* or *un-Captain America* (Chumley 2017). One comment on Evans' second tweet argued that '...Capt America would be more focused on finding peace then (*sic*) following the mainstream media agenda, our President is doing great things and defending this country a lot more then you ever will because your just an actor, ur more Jake Wyler not Cap- #MAGA #diplomacyoverwar' (@ericachberger 2018<sup>16</sup>). When people agreed with Evans, they would quickly parallel between him and his implied courage to stand up to Trump with the courage of Captain America; while on the other hand, if people disagreed with him they would point out that Evans was merely an actor and not the *real* Captain America, ignoring the fictional background of the character. Thus, Captain America remains above any form of criticism and enjoys highest appreciation from all sides of the political spectrum. Jason Dittmer argues that because of the fragmented or changing

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<sup>13</sup> JulieaQSmith, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/JulieaQSmith/status/1018953132586536960>>

<sup>14</sup> Eric\_Kauffmann, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <[https://twitter.com/Eric\\_Kauffmann/status/1019015112928026624](https://twitter.com/Eric_Kauffmann/status/1019015112928026624)>

<sup>15</sup> AaronJMitchell, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/AaronJMitchell/status/1019038416376250368>>

<sup>16</sup> ericachberger, Twitter, 16 July 2018, <<https://twitter.com/ericachberger/status/1019081308750917632>>

media landscape it is difficult to control how Cap circulates, thus audiences are ‘projecting their own political subjectivities onto the hero’ (Dittmer 2012, 154).

How to define and interpret the figure of Captain America is a question impossible to answer as he is always as *real* as he is imagined. The question – is he a Democrat or a Republican? – will be answered according to the observer’s own beliefs rather than any form of cultural or historical scrutiny, which is not to say that such an examination was actually possible. Freedom, liberty, equality, justice, democracy as core values of American identity are held in highest spirit across the political spectrum. Wendy Brown underlines this thought by arguing:

Democracy is exalted not only across the globe today but across the political spectrum. Along with post–cold war regime changers, former Soviet subjects still revelling in entrepreneurial bliss, avatars of neoliberalism, and never-say-die liberals, the Euro-Atlantic Left is also mesmerized by the brand. We hail democracy to redress Marx’s abandonment of the political after his turn from Hegelian thematics (or we say that radical democracy was what was meant by communism all along), we seek to capture democracy for yet-untried purposes [...] Berlusconi and Bush, Derrida and Balibar, Italian communists and Hamas — we are all democrats now (2011, 45).

This fight happens via the engagement with material proof. References to specific presidents, historical events or religious and constitutional texts aim to deliver the evidence for what *Americanness* essentially is. Yet another discursive figure that is in the centre of public attention frequently is the one of the soldier and veteran. He or she fulfils a function in evoking a specific image of the nation framed by benevolence and a trans-historical mission of duty and sacrifice (Dawson 1994). Captain America is a veteran, a circumstance that is considered either directly or indirectly. His re-appearance in the comic books and in an even more dominant way in the cinema after ‘9/11’ has to be read against the backdrop of the ‘War on Terror’. His digital negotiation, then, underscores the return of an intense crisis culminating in the election of Trump. Bringing Captain America back fulfils the practical function that contemporary politics can be easily tied to fighting the *good war* and essentially punching Nazis (This 2012; Dittmer 2005). That it is part of his origin story that he gets frozen after sacrificing himself for the nation gives him the ability to re-appear at specific junctures in US history, at moments of crisis and turmoil while at the same time it releases him from taking responsibilities from less glorious, disputed historical events such as Vietnam. What counts is the focus on history that seems clean and immaculate. This does not mean that Captain America cannot address ruptures and breaking points, but when he does, it is from the perspective of the *good war* and pure *Americanness*. He is benevolent, protecting and never an aggressor.

What is unraveling now is a fierce battle to re-create a history of clarity and certainty, and value-based *Americanness*. In its historical tradition, the US has to maintain its credibility under any circumstances. Captain America has beaten fascism and communism and is now, again, resisting a totalitarian, monolithic Other as the protector of *Americanness*, the American Dream and, in short, the American nation. These narratives furthermore correlate with monomythic notions of messianic sacrifice and redemption. This existential question of what America is drives a shrill and polarized debate, heightened through the last presidential elections, in the search for truth and accuracy within US history. But the issue seems to be that ‘...[t]o address history from the point of view of “accuracy” alone is to accept that such a condition exists, and that it is disinterested, rather than ideologically motivated’ (Custen 1992, 11). The question of accuracy can further be expanded to the role Captain America occupies. The question whether he would support Donald Trump’s presidency (Comic Vine 2016) or where he belongs on the political spectrum between Democrats and Republicans (Smith 2018) gained importance for many to retain a sense of how the US and its values can and should be defined.

Democrats and Republicans as well as those who would identify as somewhere in between keep on holding Captain America in high regard. If Evans speaks out against Trump, this is appreciated by those who see Trump as standing on the opposite side of Captain America. On the other hand, those in support of Trump will quickly criticise Evans, but will remain broadly uncritical of Captain America. This demonstrates how Captain America is capable of operating beyond party lines and seems to be situated well in an unproblematic American history. That is why his image can be used for digital discourses without taking a specific political stance apart from demonstrating *Americanness*. The character himself shows to be in the same flux as the besieged American national identity. It begs the question if Captain America can still adequately represent America. In the comic book original, Captain America gets rid of his persona in 1974

as he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the US government as a reaction to the threatened impeachment and subsequent resignation of Richard Nixon. This expression of a national crisis leads Captain America to adopt the identity of Nomad. As Dittmer furthermore points out, the return of Steve Rogers as Captain America only a few issues after his appearance as Nomad was celebrated by fans with ‘...the story line having provided the catharsis through which readers could purge the national narrative of the taint of Watergate’ (2013, 120). But in the digital visual reproduction, there is no catharsis. On the contrary, what happens is more a desperate attempt to re-invigorate notions of a glorious, clear-cut past. Since 2018, Captain America has re-appeared as Nomad. Not only is his shield missing, his uniform has changed drastically: Instead of the colours of the US flag he wears a black uniform, has unkempt hair and is unshaven.

The vanishing of colour and the darkened version of the character in *Avengers: Infinity War* visually underscores the crisis of *Americanness* even for audiences unfamiliar with the Nomad narrative. Only the star remains on Captain America’s chest, but it is blackened out and thus a visual cue for the transformation of American identity and its critical condition. So far, however, there is no catharsis in sight to solve the existential crisis. The infinite character of the ‘War on Terror’ has now spilt over into an internal US debate. Baudrillard describes it as a world war and ‘...the only really global one, since what is at stake is globalization itself’ (2002, 11). But in the same vein it is the US that experiences a cultural war.

The loss of *Americanness* culminates in the question of whether the US should continue acting as an engaged or interventionist global actor for freedom and democracy or withdraw into a *Make America Great Again* isolationism. As much as America itself, Captain America has become a global phenomenon, not least because of his memorable appearances on the cinema screens and his visual dissemination via merchandise and in digital spaces. The variety of narratives and visual representations surrounding his digital circulation makes the crisis of *Americanness* visible in its ambiguity.

## Conclusion

The contemporary crisis of American identity, not original to but exacerbated through the presidency of Donald Trump, is negotiated fervently in digital and visual spaces. That such negotiations of meaning have intensified during the Trump presidency does not mean they are new. After all, it was Trump himself who made Obama’s birth certificate a national issue, and in doing so contributed to a discourse on America’s relationship to racism and questioning the essence of *Americanness*. It is the rhetoric that has changed, such as questions of treason vs patriotism and freedom vs fascism. American identity seems as up for grabs and undecided as ever.

The location for retrieving a sense of self seems to be positioned in the past. Voices arguing that *America is not the greatest country in the world anymore* (because of Trump) as well as *make America great again* both resort to the same discursive realm that lies in a fantastical and purely positive, unblemished past. After all, is Captain America still the greatest superhero in the world after becoming Nomad? Or can he make America great again?

The way that the role of Captain America for the nation and the world is discussed demonstrates the intensity of the crisis. What seems challenged so suddenly is the notion of a proud and glorious past that not only lead to the securing of national protection but also negotiated a positive relationship with the rest of the world. Further, we get the feeling that Captain America does not stand for any political camp or party but remains inherently American, a man who knows what to do at the right time. This allows especially digital audiences to project their own belief system onto his very broadly outlined image.

Captain America’s digital negotiation further tells us something about how history is being narrated: ‘Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced’ (White 1988, 1194). Following the inter-textual approach taken on the last pages, it makes sense that the visual narratives inherent in Captain America and his cultural reproduction made it from the comic books onto film and now into the digital realm.

The American crisis is visible for and has impact on the whole world, thanks to a president who keeps the world posted via Twitter about seemingly every thought he has and in doing so creates a narrative that consistently contradicts itself. Captain America becoming Nomad, *a man without country*, is visible to audiences all over the world thanks to the wide circulation of specific images and visual cues that create this crisis narrative. At the same time, references to a broader set of inherently American values and a benevolent national history collapse into images that denote nostalgia and a sense of a lost past. This produces questions of objectivity and authenticity that remain unanswered. As Baudrillard describes it: "There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared" (1983, 12).

This also applies to the circulation of images of Captain America. Even audiences who are unfamiliar with Captain America films or comics understand his negotiation in digital spaces. This demonstrates how he functions as a signifier for American identity but also navigates successfully a positive relationship with the rest of the world, his own moments of crisis reflecting the American crisis as a contemporary moment.

Popular digital culture can help to uncover the discursive material for this crisis and how this crisis is negotiated more than ever in digital spaces. Aligning with the cycle of popular culture and comic books, films and digital products such as memes and gifs, it seems only logical that if Captain America can become Nomad, he can become Captain America again. How this is going to happen remains unclear so far, but the endless transformation of Captain America signifies one thing: A tragic, endless and overall futile search for a *true* identity and an *essence* to *Americanness* that was never there in the first place.

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