Life, film, politics…
and nothing else matters

Essays on American Superhero Cinema and Television

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On Xmen

On Wednesday, 7 September 2022, a federal judge in Texas determined that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) cannot compel Christian-owned entities to cover PrEP, an HIV preventative medication, as, under federal law, it violates their religious rights. Against this background, I settled in to watch Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000).

To me, raw and on-edge as we launch into the 2022 midterms and with the 2024 election looming, a scene that encapsulates *X-Men*—making it immediately meaningful and weirdly timely—starts with the voice of Dr. Jean Grey (Famke Janssen).

The scene in question unfolds as Dr. Grey's addressing congress overlays the end of the previous scene where the—as yet unnamed—17-year-old Rogue (Anna Paquin) has become aware of the severity of her mutation, having just—nearly—kissed the life out of her unsuspecting boyfriend. As Dr. Grey's voice continues, it shows the US Capitol in full glory, bathed in sunlight on what reads like a bright, wintry day where trees are bare, yet the sky shimmers bright yellow.

The interior of the Senate is marked by austerity, the space suggesting Sc-Fi futurism, removed from what we ordinarily recognize as the traditional congress. Flags flank Dr. Grey. Senator Robert Kelly (Bruce Davison) is advocating passing a Mutant Registration Act in Congress. Dr. Grey is dressed in a red jacket signifying "seriousness," a costume signifying her equalness to masculinity (Roublou, p 83) in the same way Hillary Clinton's pantsuits did.

Dr. Grey protests the logic and validity of the proposed act. She is shot from below, indicating a degree of reverence—or respect—for what is perceived to be her knowledge or authority. The composition of shots featuring her at this point places her in close proximity to sliding panels covering a projection screen decorated with a relief of the Capitol replete with radiating beams—or spikes—indicating glory. The Capitol design juxtaposes Dr. Grey, lending her a

sense of righteousness as if her presence is more meaningful because of *how* she's positioned against the golden spikes/beams. By contrast, given his constipated demeanor, Kelly embodies Roublou's view that "masculinity, however defined, is, like capitalism, always in crisis" (89). Masculinity (and capitalism) also likes to create crisis. And construct false enemies. To that end, Malmö University's Martin Lund views Marvel Comics' mutants increasingly positioned with an allegorical otherness. Lund suggests that mutants "have been subject to many of the prejudices historically plaguing marginalized minorities, including, among other things, forced and voluntary segregation, slurs, persecution, and genocidal campaigns, and , conspiracy theories about their aims as a group."[1]

By itself, the 2022 Texas PrEP case is serious though not unexpected. Conservatives, right? But it is a warning shot. A next step after the US Supreme Court abandoned its duty to protect fundamental rights in overturning Roe v. Wade, ruling that there is no constitutional right to abortion. Add to this Florida's Gov Ron DeSantis' recent "Don't Say Gay" law, Justice Thomas's recent comments that the 2015 Marriage Equality ruling may also be reconsidered, along with Senator Ted Cruz's quick bandwagon-jump, agreeing with Thomas that legalized same-sex marriage was "clearly wrong" A pattern emerges: an old familiar homophobic trope on the otherness of queerness.

The language in this early *X-Men* scene gripped me with its overtones of the 1950s Cold War persecution of gays and lesbians in the Federal Government—the Lavender Scare—while,

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[1] Martin Lund, "The Mutant Problem: X-Men, Confirmation Bias, and the Methodology of Comics and Identity", *European journal of American studies* [Online], 10-2 | 2015, document 4, Online since 14 August 2015, connection on 12 September 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10890; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.10890

unfortunately, still feeling remarkably contemporary for the wrong reasons I mentioned.[2] All you have to do is replace the word "mutants" with "homosexuals" to see what I mean:

"…there are even rumors, Miss Gray, of mutants so powerful that they can enter our minds. And control our thoughts, taking away our God-given free will. I think the American people deserve the right to decide whether they want their children to be in school with mutants, to be taught by mutants. Ladies and gentlemen, the truth is that mutants are very real. And they are among us. We must know who they are, and above all, we must know what they can do.

A word on that 2022 PrEP case: the plaintiffs argued that they should not be obligated to cover the medication as they do not encourage "homosexual behavior," and—for context—under the ACA, health insurance has to cover recommended preventive services, including HIV testing and PrEP for adults who are at high risk of contracting HIV[3].

In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway articulates resistance to binaries constructed and presented by the Western culture machine, suggesting a fundamental breakdown between man and machine. She positions feminist politics as symbol or trope, stating that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs" (8). Haraway asserts that the cyborg could even represent "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self," because it consists of a fractured, constructed self that describes/ mirrors associated post-modern humanity, or the human outlook (23). Haraway may as well be describing queerness.

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[2] Wagner, R. Richard. We've Been Here All along: Wisconsin's Early Gay History, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2019.

[3] Judge O'Connor found that the "PrEP mandate substantially burdens [the] religious exercise" because: "(1) the Bible is "the authoritative and inerrant word of God," (2) the "Bible condemns sexual activity outside marriage between one man and one woman, including homosexual conduct," (3) providing coverage of PrEP drugs facilitates and encourages homosexual behavior, intravenous drug use, and sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman," and (4) providing coverage of PrEP would make [the plaintiff] complicit in those behaviors."

Meanwhile, in the *X-Men* scene, a bald man observes the horseshoe-shaped congress from an elevated position indicating a voyeuristic intention while positioning him outside the circle—looking in. When Senator Kelly aggressively confronts Dr. Grey on the dais, her position relative to the radiating backdrop changes. When Kelly gets up to share information on the whereabouts of mutants, he seems bathed in selective sidelight. At the same time, Dr. Grey shifts into a central position in front of the Capitol panel image, its beams now almost radiating entirely around her head. and she, for the time being, remains in an illuminated position.

With Kelly's diatribe picking up steam—and approving reactions from the members of Congress—Dr. Grey seems to lose her alpha footing while Kelly's argument backs her into submission, the radiating capital behind her all but shifting out of view. She no longer commands centre screen. The power dynamic between them is exchanging against a more expansive view of the Capitol image. Kelly—and the very commanding presence of the Capitol—had siphoned off some of the glory. Dr. Grey had been put in her place.

A distinct tonal difference—in ambient color—between Dr. Grey and that of the audience emerges. The tonality of the space surrounding attending senators feels darker—mustier—somehow colder, suggesting a blueish filter (a blue hue shows up frequently in the film, often hinting at alienation.) However, the juxtaposition between red tonalities surrounding Dr. Grey and the rest of the space is striking. Most of the attending senators seem shadowy, illuminated only by a few bright lights on their desks.

A long camera shot takes an elevated view of the horseshoe circling the bald man again, revealing a central character, Professor Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart), visibly concerned at the audience's enthusiasm elicited by Kelly's rhetoric. One senator uncannily resembles Mitch McConnell, which, from a 2022 perspective, adds renewed relevance to the scene—and unfortunate political familiarity—calling to mind Foucault writing that, "above all, one sees that the focus of critique is essentially the cluster of relations that bind the one to the other, or the one to the two

others, power, truth and the subject"(*What is Critique?*, 386). It is this "view from the present" that suddenly hits home. It pivots the argument of "otherness" when it comes to meaning of "mutant." In his <u>1985 seminar on Foucault</u>, philosopher Gilles Deleuze—returning to his theme of *visibilités*—says that "literature is composed not only of statements, it is also composed of visibilities captured by statements."

Not to dwell, but one of Foucault's main points was the existence of "positive unconscious" of vision determining not *what* is seen but what *can* be seen. That not all are visible at once. A specific time period only lets some things be seen, and not others, while art illuminates some things and, conversely, obscures others. It is this element that viewing a film such as *X-men* twenty years later unlocks.

By the end of the scene, a quiet resolve enters the space indicating Senator Kelly's upper hand as he is making a final point to an audience he is now commanding. The Capitol's gold beams radiate from his head—the bearer of truth and the voice of reason amid the politics of paranoia and propaganda and what Richard Hofstadter called "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in his seminal Harper's article. This scene ends as the audience takes their cue from his confidence and obvious radiating of light. They clap hands, and the scene ends with Professor Charles Xavier looking around the audience, seeing Magneto (Ian McKellen) putting on his hat, ready to leave, pursuing him.

To conclude—and not part of this scene—Magneto's eventual revealing his tattoo identifying him to be an Auschwitz survivor underlines the presence of the kind of cognitive dichotomy that has come to plague ethics and morality, often informing realpolitik—think Reagan/Thatcher support for the Apartheid system during the early 80s, or more recently, highly weaponized views and enforced opinion around Zionism and the Palestinian challenge. Or figures such as Peter Thiel acting in ways that diametrically oppose and downright muddle the goals and work of the queer community.

On *Unbreakable* (2000)

Søren Kierkegaard writes, "Just as gold is purified in the fire, so the soul is purified in sufferings. But what does the fire take away from the gold?"[4]

Unbreakable (2000) by M. Night Shyamalan presents Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson), a disturbed and fragile man who is compelled to help David Dunn (Bruce Willis), the "unbreakable" white man, realize his ability to conquer evil with good. Dunn is the—only—survivor of a train derailment that kills hundreds. It is a miraculous event until comic book peddler Price suggests that Dunn cannot be harmed—or broken. Therefore, is Dunn a superhero? Throughout, *Unbreakable's* other characters seem keen for Dunn to morph into something more than the sum of his parts.

Dunn's son, Joseph (Spencer Treat Clark), views his dad in an elevated way—heroic, one might say—and his hero-worship of Dunn Sr. is one of the more challenging aspects of the film. Dunn's wife, Audrey (Robin Wright Penn), is less enthusiastic. Audrey's lack of emotional connection seeing her husband after the crash is another challenging moment, implying disconnect and discontent. Their tension is palpable, but they are not entirely dissimilar, Dunn—like his wife—being caught in being a diminished version of himself, timid even, running counterintuitive to his career as security guard, which is fundamentally to protect people, albeit one who is hesitant about seeing what he's actually made of, and so, he doesn't look under the proverbial hood. What is needed is a catalyst. Enter Price.

Price is less invested in Dunn's becoming-process than Dunn's existence on the other end of an extreme spectrum. For Price, Dunn represents validation, and, to that end, Price judges possible superhero candidates on how successfully they prevail. Price is seeking his antithesis: one whose

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[4] *Christian Discourses,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 102.

bones are unbreakable, the reverse of osteogenesis imperfecta (brittle bone disease), the condition he suffers from.

Price brings to mind Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the late Twentieth Century," in that Price is "a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self," precisely because he can only survive as a fragmented, constructed body/self that reflects his interconnected, postmodern human experience in loaded times.

Dunn, however, is revealed as superhuman, becoming interested in saving others over time. And his unlikely superhuman/hero persona is profoundly predicated on the roles of those close to him. It's what Peter H. Gibbon describes when in "A Call to Heroism," he writes that. "[t]he definition of hero remains subjective. What is extraordinary can be debated. Courage is in the eye of the beholder. Greatness of soul is elusive. Inevitably there will be debates over how many and what kinds of flaws a person can have as still be considered heroic" (p. 12).

Given Shyamalan's penchant for plot twists and unforeseen outcomes, *Unbreakable* sees Shyamalan play with perspective. His message seems to be that to affect or change one's world, one has to view it from a different angle. It's how Price does/did it. His mother explains—excuses—his idiosyncrasies as a matter of causality: in his case, it is past trauma. Price views the world from a different angle—inverted—unfettered from generics and laws that govern physics, imaging a world in which he is not isolated but, instead, anchored as one extreme on a scale, and so, he is desperate —destructive—in his quest for his polar opposite. That counter-anchor is David Dunn.

When young Price is given a comic book by his mother, he views it upside down, the camera —and his take on it—rotating vertiginously (*Shyamalan* 00:23:42). But, his first glimpse of the gift from his mother was from the second floor, the wrapped gift, centre screen with young Price and his mother shot over the shoulder, in silhouette.

"Someone's gonna take it," Price says, talking about the wrapped gift.

"Then you'd better get out there soon," his mom responds.

The editing is swift to a reverse-view: the building and open window viewed from behind the bench, through the slats. Price, arm in a sling from his previous injury, exits the house for the bench. The wrapped gift is now screen-right, the ribbon alluring and perfectly aligned between the bench slats. Despite the wrapped item being a gift—his for the taking—the composition of the shot underlines that for Price, nothing will ever be easy or carefree.

Price is next seen from a low angle in medium shot. He rips open the gift, tearing the paper and opens the box. The comic book is upside down. He tilts his head and with that the screen rotates. The effect is dizzying and somewhat bewildering from the viewer's perspective, hinting at his emotional and psychological state. His mother's drive and hopes and efforts to help normalize Price's world are apparent, and while her face is side-lit against a pale sky, he remains underlit, his reaction to the gift hard to detect except when he looks at his mother, and he is somewhat more illuminated. He is brighter—more visible—in her light.

Price has an infantile worldview. He holds on to the impossible. He needs a hero. In this, he is not that different from Joseph Dunn. In a way, as characters, they are yoked.

Joseph, too, sees things from a different angle. When we meet him he is watching TV, hanging upside-down from the sofa. (*Shyamalan* 00:08:52)

Cutting away from a shot establishing the sunny main street of the working-class Pennsylvania town he lives in, the Dunn residence is unremarkable, with functional wallpaper and somewhat subdued light considering the bright day outside. The TV is blaring—a little too loud and a little too bright, compared with the tension of the train scene that preceded it. We are introduced to David Dunn's son, Joseph, who, upside-down, centre screen, channel hops past the Jerry Springer show and The Powerpuff Girls before pausing at the news channel covering the Eastrail train accident. The camera remains static as the character turns around, drawn into the unfolding news, the contrast with the previous relaxed body position and bored channel surfing indicating his

intuiting the possible danger his father may be in. The prominent visual placement of "…The 3:40 Eastrail #177 has derailed…" chyron, coupled with the news anchor announcing the same headlines, draws Joseph in, leaving him to make the connection and confirming his suspicion when he hurries down the corridor to read a yellow Post-it on the fridge:

> Dad,
>
> Eastrail
>
> #177
>
> 3:40 p.m.

Joseph's upside-down pose on the sofa is mirrored by Price when he falls on the subway steps (*Shyamalan* 00:42:59).

The "upside-down" device in *Unbreakable* reveals hidden truths and various times: that Dunn is in the derailed train, and that Dunn was right about the gun. Price will never be a normal kid. Or adult, and, he will perpetually go from one traumatic injury to the next.

But we also see Joseph's upside-down worldview when he helps his dad lift weights. Joseph's refusal to be daunted by the laws of physics and sheer self-belief, assists and empowers Dunn to reach and appreciate his potential.

But Dunn is ordinary. Forgettable and unremarkable, he is in a self-imposed disguise before Price transforms him into a sort-of caped crusader. Only after meeting Price does Dunn lean into his destiny as superhero: standing in the station, intending to sense and fight crime, Dunn assumes a quasi-Jesus pose. And as can be expected, the job of hero/superhuman/Jesus comes with a few caveats. Saving people is hard. Dunn has visions a-plenty but cannot intervene. Except for one murder. But the bodies keep piling up. Price is willing to sacrifice many to find the one.

Like Peter Parker, Bruce Banner, David Dunn—note the alliteration—doesn't die to save anyone, but for Dunn, falling into the pool is akin to falling into a grave, a bewildering netherworld, and one, when he emerges from it, renders him unstoppable.

Besides Shyamalan's take on visual perspective in *Unbreakable,* he also pivots Price's position relative to Dunn as everyman and Dunn the hero. Price reveals himself as villain, and in *Unbreakable's* <u>final scene</u>, he claims the villain to always be the exact opposite of the hero. If *Unbreakable* is Dunn's origin story, Price is the catalyst: the thing that sets Dunn on his path. It is this aspect that gives Price his Magical Negro qualities.

Matthew W. Hughey (2009) quotes Laurence Gross writing, "when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda" Hughey continues, "being visible and accepted is not a guarantee that the visible groups will be legitimized; visibility and acceptance is a 'precondition of regimes of surveillance'" (p.544).

Hughey describes the Magical Negro as a stock character who often appears impoverished, lower class, and uneducated, yet possesses some supernatural, magical abilities or other-worldly, often folkloric, wisdom. This blend of power and wisdom is exclusively used to save and uplift broken, uncultured, and morally bankrupt whites.

For too many whites, however, the Magical Negro is real, and recent research on superhumanizaton bias suggests that magical qualities to Black men and women are linked to deadly consequences. A 2014 study on bias in white perception of Blackness <u>finds</u> that "a subtler form of dehumanization of Blacks persists [that] increases endorsement of police brutality against Blacks … and reduces altruism toward Blacks." According to their research, this superhumanizaton bias shapes white people's perceptions of Black people.

There is a significant difference between Jackson's Price and the cast of *The Help* (2011), forcing consideration of trope in Magical Blackness. Most Magical Negroes are "mammy" or "aged wise butler" figures, again, think *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), or anything starring Morgan Friedman. But *Unbreakable* throws us a curveball. Price is neither mammy nor butler.

In a way, Price is the rarest of birds, a Black Savior, albeit one that makes white folk twitchy. For Dunn's character to fully start his liberation and emancipation from "tortured would-be-philanderer" to superhero, Price has to be flawed, dangerous, and unpredictable. And weakened. Hence a controlled—superhumanized—version of himself.

Unbreakable breaks the basic structure of the magical African American (male) character in significant ways. Price has a history (and agency). He comes from somewhere, and that origin is not vague, extraordinary, or particularly other-worldly. He does, however, still present the threatening trope; he's the Big Black Man implying a brand of danger that makes white people twitchy. He has magical powers, rather vaguely defined, and his purpose in the story is to use his powers to elevate a white man.

The "magical negro" is more than a trope or film stereotype. It is a carefully constructed image that feeds into white mass paranoia, speaking to a broader issue of representation. The casting of *Unbreakable* is simultaneously inspired and revealing. Dunn/Willis is the original "Yippie-Ki-Yay MotherFucker," who, in this iteration, has fallen on tough times, while Price/Jackson is the gun-toting "Royale with Cheese" type. Both come with on-screen baggage. In real life, men like Willis are conditioned to fear and marginalize men like Jackson.

Price/Jackson (and, for that matter, Dunn/Willis and director M Night Shalayam) live in an era of surveillance, disenfranchisement, and extreme political polarization. They inhabit a country with asymmetric mass incarceration of Black men, with, some sources claim, one in three Black men destined to be imprisoned. Add to that a zeitgeist critical of big banks, law enforcement, and federal governance, all seemingly at a loss when it comes to taking responsibility (or at least denying culpability) and facing little repercussions for their lack of social conscience. It is an easy age for cynicism.

But, it is also the age of Black Lives Matter. And the rise of democratic journalism in the shape of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Sort of. Ish. And while instances of violence and

discrimination have not become less pervasive, they are now more instantaneously visible. So, the loss of humanity and sheer pain of a Black man murdered by the police is not solely the result of the superhumanized "Magical Negro" but also an indictment of the kind of society that allows (and, in some cases, encourages) it.

For some, is whiteness their superpower? It would explain a lot.

On *Spider Man* (2002)

In 2019, Martin Scorsese writes, "I was asked a question about Marvel movies. I answered it. I said that I've tried to watch a few of them and that they're not for me, that they seem to me to be closer to theme parks than they are to movies as I've known and loved them throughout my life, and that in the end, I don't think they're cinema."

Tom Gunning's *"The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, It's Spectator and the Avant-Garde,"* first appeared in *Wide Angle*, a film quarterly, in 1986. In the essay's title, note the missing "s" at the end of attraction, compared with *"Now You See It, Now You Don't: the Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions,"* published in 1993, also by Gunning. Media archaeologist, Wanda Strauven, notes that Gunning's collaborator on a joint paper on the same subject[5], André Gaudreault, uses the term "cinématographie-attraction," which he, in turn, borrows from historian G.-Michel Coissac. Gunning later updates his articles to reflect the plural. Strauven points at the use of the word "cinematography"(as opposed to "cinema") and the implication that "attraction" fell under its banner in that, at the time of Coissac's writing, "cinematography" was an almost thaumaturgic invention. Cinematography can be defined as "the illusion of movement by the recording and subsequent rapid projection of many still photographic pictures on a screen.[6]"

The term "cinématographie-attraction" suggests a succession of articulations or, to put it in a modern context relevant to Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002), sequences of special—even magical—tricks and effects. The question Scorsese raises is whether the "marvel" genre of cinema has been

[5] André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, "Le cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'histoire du cinéma?," Histoire du cinéma. Nouvelles approches, ed. Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault and Michel Marie (Paris: Sorbonne). Gunning published his second essay on the term, namely "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," Art and Text (Spring); rpt. in Film Theory and Criticism, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford UP)

[6] "A Very Short History of Cinema." *National Science and Media Museum*, https://www.scienceandmediamuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/very-short-history-of-cinema.

reduced to a series of narrative-deficient attractions, unable to capture the deeper essence of humanity. This stands in opposition to randomized—yet structured—cinematographic sequences as part of the narrative whole, where the uniqueness of the attraction is celebrated and not presented as an autonomous event.

The duality suggested by "cinema of attractions" begs clarification as storytelling-informed performance has long been part of "attraction." And visual surprise has been the stuff of circus and opera well before cinema. But the cinematograph, unlike the mustachioed lion tamer or diva jumping off the Castel Sant'Angelo, stands out as an expression of technology. Cinematography itself may be an attraction in some cases, setting up a tension between the attractive and narrative.

Gunning argues that early film relies on spectacle. Shown at carnivals and as part of exhibitions—and later specially constructed public parlors—film was aimed at captivating an audience with flickering, moving images, and less about what these sequences and tableaus meant. It was enough that they *were*. Gunning sums it up: "The cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle- a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself" (384). There was little need for story. Images were story.

Méliès, cinema's first true artist and innovator, stated bluntly that narrative was just the mechanism for cobbling together a series of attractions: "I use it merely as a pretext for the 'stage effects,' the 'tricks,' or for a nicely arranged tableau."

It seems expected, even predictable, to deride a spectacle such as *Spider-Man* (2002) for its use of a visual language wildly in favor of spectacle. If Méliès' goal was to dazzle and delight, *Spider-Man* is simply carrying that torch.

But Peter Parker, the man who becomes Spider-Man, is also a poster boy for white patriarchy. And by some measure, Parker *is* the American Dream. He is the scrappy kid who can. Parker is the embodiment of first-generation pluckiness, who, overcoming second-class Irishness/

Italianness/Catholicness/Jewishness—but not quite Blackness or gayness—earns him a football scholarship; a place at Yale, and a seat at the table of industry.

Parker personifies a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" logic that seeks to underplay the futility—and over-simplification—of the overused and misapplied statement. If anything, lack of diversity and exclusion on a grand scale exposes the selectiveness of the American dream.

Lucky for Peter, though, he evolves from bullied high school student to gifted—righteous—vigilante. In *"Spider-Man as Benedict Arnold, Objectivist, and Class Warrior,"* Marc Dipaolo goes further, writing that "Spider-Man is the quintessential loser-hero." Dipaolo suggests that despite Parker's power as arachnoid alter-ego, he consistently finds it hard to make ends meet. For his part, Toby Macguire as Peter Parker contributes dorky realness to the Raimi spider-verse, playing into a post-grunge, slacker-adjacent persona. But as Dipaolo points out, what makes Spider-Man a perfect working-class "everyman' hero is that, amid adversity, Parker recognizes his privilege and fights for the greater good.

Spider-Man (2002) is a monument of the "cinema of attractions" since his core competency depends heavily on his ability to ejaculate spiderweb strands from his wrists, a feat that allows him to swing between buildings and structures[7]. By 2002, this superpower had appeared mostly in animation and comics since the live-action requirements to illustrate his power were so high. Technology allowed Hollywood to bring a realistic spectacle to the bioscope. In doing so, Sony Pictures, through massive deployment of CGI, pivoted the genre.

Any talk of *Spider-Man* has to pause at it as franchise. Sequels and reboots build on existing awareness of the character, while it promises greater reach into international markets[8]**.** This international potential affects the narrative quotient, since a film aimed at an international audience

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[7] Maslon, Laurence. Superheroes!: Capes, Cowls, and the Creation of Comic Book Culture. 1st ed. New York: Crown Archetype, 2013. Print.

[8] Garrahan, Matthew. "He'll be Back: The Rise and Rise of the Franchise." *Financial Times*: 1. Dec 13 2014. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Mar. 2016.

needs not reflect the culture, policies, and politics of the USA. It allows the sequel even greater attraction-style spectacle. And a degree of narrative vagueness.

This was not the case with the 2002 *Spider-Man*, that, against a post-9/11 mental landscape, needed to prevail through catharsis (Sommers)[9]. And, given its time and provenance, Peter H Gibbon's *"A Call To Heroism"* lauds the same thing.

Gibbon presents a sanitized—whitewashed—version of a "hero" concept. He evangelizes this particular meaning, and, to the demographic who likes its young to die in war and feel better when ordinary folk do not have healthcare, the idea of Thomas Carlyle's <u>Great Man Theory</u> must be akin to catnip.

For Gibbon, the great leaders—the hero—emerges during some great need. They form a bedrock upon which we build subsequent—stronger—versions of ourselves. Gibbon argues that by studying greatness, we invest in personal heroism: and by appreciating the hero's life—their accomplishments—we are enriching and uncovering aspects of our character.

Gibbon writes from a post-9/11 perspective, a post-traumatic space he shares with the 2002 iteration of *Spider-Man*. But, our orientation relative to heroism and our collective vantage point has radically shifted. Since 2001/2002, our "hero model" has been recalibrated by events such as the Trump Presidency and the January 6 Insurrection. Talk about "a Call To Heroism." Our time/place matrix has shifted and been discombobulated by Covid, and consequential societal events, such as the murder of George Floyd. In many ways, we are in a reckoning.

Some find Gibbon's thesis and his argument that "heroic ideals are fundamental" to "American liberty and to the very fabric of our nation's culture" compelling. To me, however, Gibbon ultimately comments on patriarchal assumptions in the face of unthinkable tragedy through

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[9] Sommers, Joseph Michael. "The Traumatic Revision of Marvel's Spider-Man: From 1960s Dime-Store Comic Book to Post-9/11 Moody Motion Picture Franchise." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 37.2 (Summer 2012): 188-201. Web. 11 Jan. 2017.

a filter of historically significant heroes. If anything, he illustrates how academics, politicians, and historians reflect the mindset—and bias—of their age.

We are not the same as we were. Reading Gibbon underlines that.

On *V for Vendetta* (2002)

In 2005, Zimbabwean artist, Dan Halter, exhibited a range of new works, *The Original is Unfaithful to the Translation*, at the WhatIfTheWorld Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. The exhibition referenced the notion of post-colonial Africanism vendetta. One piece, *V for Vendetta,* incorporates the form of the highly recognizable—iconic—Guy Fawkes mask into the traditional African tribal mask. Halter's work suggests that vendetta is a natural—expected—reaction to colonialism. But, more than that, is the idea that emotional components of vendetta may be embraced, internalized, replicated, and transferred from one generation—or society—to the next. As memory. A souvenir to be relived—shared—through narrative while serving as core motivation for generational anger and future resentment.

For a while after the release of *V for Vendetta,* Guy Fawkes masks, synonymous with the main character*,* did significant time as recognizable visual shorthand condemning various forms of

tyranny. Appropriated by the hacktivist group Anonymous, the V mask showed up at events protesting groups as diverse as Westboro Baptist Church, Scientology, and, of course, Wall Street. *V for Vendetta* (2005) is a dystopian narrative directed by James McTeigue from a screenplay by Lana and Lily Wachowski, based on the DC Vertigo Comic by Alan Moore and David Lloyd. The story functions as a critique of disengagement—complacency—especially when confronted by rising fascism.

In *V for Vendetta*, memory acts as recurring leitmotiv informing change and the emergence of group social awareness. Protagonist V (Hugo Weaving) is motivated by memories of trauma he endured at Larkhill, a clandestine detention facility dedicated to research into human experimentation and biological weapons, operated by Norsefire, a fascist authoritarian regime ruling Britain under direction of High Chancellor Adam Sutler (John Hurt).

Casting Hurt is a nod to memory itself, Hurt having played Winston Smith, the everyman figure in the film version of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), itself ne plus ultra in terms of portraying dystopia.

V is propelled by vengeance—haunted by the memory of it—to bring down Norsefire and liberate London. For her part, Evey (Natalie Portman) is moved to social responsibility and exacting retribution through a letter written by LGBTQ woman, Valerie Page, about her experiences in LGBTQ "resettlement camps" run by Norsefire. It is an example of memory by proxy, and its effect on empathy. Evey emerges as ally-activist.

"Remember," the narration starts, as it references the Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot, a historic event embedded in the cultural memory of the UK, celebrated with bonfires and fireworks in some parts of the Commonwealth, including South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the Bahamas. V, the protagonist of *V for Vendetta,* frames Fawkes not as traitor or terrorist but, instead, as freedom fighter. He encourages us to question the accepted knowledge of our inherited cultural memory instead re-contextualizing it. V doesn't, however, expect us to reject or deny collective memory. He

suggests we keep an open mind to possibility and alternate outcomes.

"We Are Told To Remember The Idea, Not The Man. Because A Man Can Fail." V continues, "He can be caught, he can be killed and forgotten, but 400 years later, an idea can still change the world." V was never destined to be a relatable hero. *He* is an idea.

V for Vendetta stresses the risk of memory acting as constraint. V tells Evey that "the past can't hurt you anymore, not unless you let it." He taps into the mechanism by which memory of torture, discipline, or punishment perpetuates fear and stifles rebellion.

The film echoes Toni Morrison, who, in Beloved, writes, "Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place — the picture of it — stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world happened."

Morrison creates a new word when writing *Beloved[10]*: Rememory. Morrison distinguishes between "rememory" and memory. To her, memory is sustained knowing, linked to events and moments we spontaneously recall. "Rememory," by contrast, names and identifies anamnesis, the reliving of events and moments we have chosen to forget or, as Freud suspected, repressed. In his paper, *The Uncanny*, Freud identifies a distinct "class of…frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." He suggests that some things we experience as adults remind us of previous psychic events, aspects of our unconscious life, or primitive exposures as a species[11].

Both Freud and Morrison—and *V for Vendetta*—lean into collective memory. By now, the widely recognized V face mask is part of collective memory and recognition thanks to extensive online coverage of social vigilantism associated with the mask and its meaning. Indeed the concept of collective memory has become conjoined with digital sharing and proliferation, some now referring

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[10] Morrison, Toni. *Beloved.* New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

[11] Freud, Sigmund. "The 'Uncanny.'" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 929-52.

to "connective memory" instead[12].

London reveals itself as a character in the film. Cobblestone streets appear menacing, the cloud seeming desaturated and filtered, living up to the image of the foggy drabness one associates with London. Megaphones are omnipresent. It's an alienating society run by a formidable government keeping scared oppidans in perpetual fear and paranoia. *V for Vendetta* amplifies what the reader imagines George Orwell's *1984* London to look like. Not too far-fetched, however, as in real life, in 2022, CCTV is part of life, and London is the most surveilled city outside China.

V for Vendetta shows us a totalitarian Britain, a country built on an Orwellian diet of endless sloganeering and talking heads spewing propaganda with an "end-times" slant. The sight of Lewis Prothero (Roger Allam) proselytizing through inflammatory rhetoric is more familiar to an audience in 2022 than it should be, foreshadowing media giants such as Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson. It's what makes the film so powerful. That there is a sense of the familiar in the very blood of it.

> Lewis Prothero: USA… Ulcered Sphincter of Arse-erica, I mean what else can you say? Here was a country that had everything, absolutely everything. And now, 20 years later, is what? The world's biggest leper colony. Why? Godlessness. Let me say that again... Godlessness. It wasn't the war they started. It wasn't the plague they created. It was Judgement. **No one escapes their past.** No one escapes Judgement. You think he's not up there? You think he's not watching over this country? How else can you explain it? He tested us, but we came through. We did what we had to do. Islington. Enfield. **I was there, I saw it all. Immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, terrorists. Disease-ridden degenerates. They had to go.**

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[12] Hoskin, A. (2011). Anachronisms of Media, Anachronisms of Memory: From Collective Memory to a New Memory Ecology "Connective Memory" On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a new age. O. Meyers, M. Neiger and E. Zandberg. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

> **Strength through unity.** Unity through faith. I'm a God-fearing Englishman and
> I'm goddamn proud of it!

Much of the world created in *V for Vendetta* can be attributed to that government slogan: "Strength through unity, and unity through faith." It's a pure propagandist slogan as warning, its use indicating that unquestioning loyalty is required.

It is a trigger slogan for me.

"Ex unitate vires," translated as "from unity, strength" was the motto of the Nationalist Apartheid regime of South Africa, in power between 1951 and 1994. An Orwellian—paranoid—regime by any standard. Prothero and his diatribe recalls Richard Hofstadter writing, "the paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of wholeworlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values" (p 6/11).[13]

After the events at Jordan Tower, V brings Evey to the safety of his home, the Shadow Gallery. In the scene, she wakes up to the diagetic strains of Julie London's *Cry Me a River* by Arthur Hamilton, a revenge anthem albeit delivered as seductive torch song, the London recording revered for its minimalist instrumentation—bass and guitar only—and London's smokey voice. The scene is designed to show a room brimful of books, lest the viewer doubts V's erudition. The camera follows a perplexed-looking Evey as she makes her way past V's curated memory and history. The tonality of the sequence matches London's burnished singing. The camera reveals V's collection from Evey's point of view. The collection recalls a vault of *Entartete Kunst,* degenerate art, a term used by the Nazi Party in Germany to banish art that did not ascribe to ideals of Nazism. Beyond mere living with history and memory, V is informed and shaped by equally lost values, such as justice and chivalry. V places value on honor. And courage. His body—and headspace—had become sites of trauma in a perpetual state of readiness for what he sees as a revolution.

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[13] *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, by Richard Hofstadter, Harper's, November 1964.

V is burdened by memory and things past. He personifies Freud's <u>assertion</u> that we are defined—transformed through trauma—by loss. But V also recalls Derrida's "<u>topos</u> of loss," that loss is foundational to any construct. V is defined by a sense of loss and his memory of it while becoming a conduit for the trauma contained by both the loss and memory.

It is a slippery slope, however, as witnesses to the January 6 insurrection on the US Capitol may attest. The failed coup was equally rooted in collective memory, fueled by fiery rhetoric, and sustained by a willingness to do whatever it takes. It was an exercise in "legitimized" lawlessness. Civil unrest often is.

The scene in V's Shadow Gallery connects visually—and spiritually—to the one when Evey looks for shelter with Gordon, a coworker. He shows Evey his hidden room of artifacts abolished by the government. Gordon, like V, lives with memories and *mementi mor*i. A few erotic pictures catch Evey's eye. "You wear a mask for so long you forget who you were beneath it," Gordon says about his sexuality, admitting his fear of discovery as a gay man. Gordon has no identity. He lives in/through memories.

If anything, these scenes with Evey allow us a voyeuristic glimpse into the modulated lives of men, defined by what once was. Evey bears witness to how much we are shaped by memory: loss of it, reflection on it, living with it, and perhaps most of all, sharing it. And how memory shapes the future.

Susan Sontag, <u>interviewed</u> by Boston Review in 1975 after the publication of her seminal <u>essays</u> on photography, says that "a movie amounts to an anthology of single shots. I can recall the story, lines of dialogue, the rhythm. But what I remember visually are selected moments that I have, in effect, reduced to stills. It's the same for one's own life." Photography has formalized and "objectified this way of seeing and remembering."

Sontag's commentary on the "torture of Iraqi prisoners by Americans in the most infamous of Saddam Hussein's prisons, Abu Ghraib, further underlines this shift in how we view, process, and

remember. Milan Kundera writes that "forgetting is a form of death ever present within life…but forgetting is also the great problem of politics. When a big power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness, it uses the method of organized forgetting…a nation which loses awareness of its past gradually loses itself."

When photography is this raw, there is no forgetting, just reframing. Suffice to say, after every mass shooting; after every murder of Black men by over-aggressive police; and after the US Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, much like our response to the Abu Ghraib images, there is collective clutching of pearls as we ask, "is this really us?" On the Abu Ghraib images, Sontag is unambiguous, writing, "the photographs are us."

V's revolution-in-the-making is predicated on historic memory, symbology, personal verbosity, and endurance. V imparts his curated collective memories to a starved society primed to forget. When V attacks the Old Bailey to the strains of Tchaikovsky—an LGBTQ composer—he inflicts damage on a historic building. Some may read that as a contradiction since the Old Bailey itself is a site of collective memory. V points to the possibility that under totalitarian leadership, our monuments become sites of moral bankruptcy. To V, the Old Bailey does not represent justice anymore. Its memory had been sullied, and consequently, V updates our collective memory, adding to collective history.

After the Old Bailey incident, V claims that "there is something wrong with the country," and he all but calls England to arms. To V, democracy can only be saved by destroying its lost symbols and icons.

When Evey is unsure why the parliament buildings need to be blown up V responds that, "a building is a symbol, as is the act of destroying it. Symbols are given power by people. Alone, a symbol is meaningless, but with enough people, blowing up a building can change the world."

In Chapter 3 of *A Call to Heroism, Peter Gibbon* refers to Frederick Douglass and Douglass' views on the end of slavery. Gibbon writes, "Douglass welcomed the Civil War, believing that only a violent

struggle could end slavery" (p. 49). In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself,* Douglass describes the violence—brutality—of slavery and alludes to the act that omnipresent violence and the constant threat of it form the bedrock of subjugation. Douglass does not explicitly state the need for engagement of violence. He does not need to. He can't, for that matter. It is implied. It would be dangerous for Douglass to state his belief directly. If anything, Douglass points at the futility of doing nothing, or for that matter, nonviolence. One of Douglass' most heroic quotes, in response to his tormentor, Covey, reads: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Narrative 1038) For Douglass (and for V, as well as Nelson Mandela on a different continent facing a brutal Apartheid regime), violence is transformative in every conceivable way. Once the subjugated rejects the ferocious power of violence, after harnessing their strength and resolve, the only solution is to strike back. It's a form of self-defense. Gibbon's overt linking heroism with Americanness is less satisfying, filtered through Christianity, or at least a specific flavor of it.

On *Iron Man* (2008)

"I know this—a man got to do what he got to do."

1939, John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*.

"Well, there's some things a man just can't run away from."

1939, John Wayne in *Stagecoach*.

"A man ought'a do what he thinks is best."

1954, John Wayne in *Hondo*.

In making sense of a film such as *Iron Man* (2008)—both dialogue and character development—we may pause and consider if it bypasses significant symptomatic meaning. Or, is the film's meaning purely explicit as an expression of its time and possibly reflective of intended spectatorship?

The attacks of September 11, 2001, endures as one of those days the music died, the events still looming over our collective psyche in profound ways. The 9/11 trauma ignited a need for vendetta. It framed an enemy, gave us "freedom fries" and redefined masculinity. It is therefore hard not to read *Iron Man* as a mirror of a society learning to heal after unspeakable tragedy. It seems—to me— to be a wounded patriarchal gaze. At the time of *Iron Man's* release, Bin Laden had not yet been eliminated (that would only happen in May 2011) and the Iraq War was still supported within the United States and by 2006, "69% of adults said the U.S. made the right decision in using military force in Afghanistan. Only two in ten said it was the wrong decision."[14]

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[14] Hartig, Hannah, and Carroll Doherty. "Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, Pew Research Center, 11 Oct. 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/.

In "The Spirit of Terrorism," Jean Baudrillard writes: "All the speeches and commentaries about September 11 betray the gigantic abreaction to the event itself and people's fascination with it."[15] To Baudrillard, the 'power' of 9/11 was not in the violence but what it symbolized. "Good and Evil rise simultaneously," Baudrillard <u>writes</u>, calling terrorism "the fourth World War."

In some ways, the zeitgeist facilitated a simplistic "get things done" hero, John Wayne-esque, gung-ho, with a little James Bond glamour, and added cool. And urgency. When a national crisis occurs, masculine identity is self-scrutinized. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's "theory of castration" relies heavily on the "radical symbolic event." According to Professor of Cultural Studies, Anthony Easthope, "the castration complex is an idea or meaning that arises in the gap between the two sexes, as the masculine which is not feminine and feminine not masculine. The masculine myth aims to reconstruct castration on its own grounds."[16]

To Eastman, this model to "reconstruct castration on its own grounds" is how men reconstruct identities when faced with cultural emasculation. A character such as Tony Stark suggests a male identity that, within context of trauma and its memory, is reconstructed—reclaimed—and repositioned. Mulvey comments on castration anxiety by saying that the woman "connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure." Stark seems to embody both versions of castration anxiety.

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[15] Baudrillard, Jean, and Chris Turner. The Spirit of Terrorism: And Other Essays. Verso, 2012.

[16] Easthope, Antony. What a Man's Gotta Do: the Masculine Myth in Popular Culture. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Character development and dialogue in *Iron Man* seem invested in a specific flavor of hegemonic masculinity—Yann Roblou points to this in *Complex Masculinities*.[17] It's a version of "being a man" that contrasts with the introspective or even domestic iterations of 1990s masculinity. In the post-9/11 world, George W. Bush is positioned with a cowboy hat and Texan drawl, diametric to a softer-edged, sax-playing Bill Clinton who preceded him. Bush is harsher. Punitive. He offers security and retribution. To that end, *Iron Man* seems to be another installment in ongoing "remasculinization" as "a regeneration of the concepts, constructions, and definitions of masculinity in American culture and a restabilization of the gender system within and for which it is formulated."[18]

Trolling the pages of Quora and Reddit, younger men seem relentlessly positive about *Iron Man* and typically the version of <u>manhood</u> exhibited by Tony Stark. The manosphere is fraught with negative comments on women, society, democracy, groups, and violence.[19] A cursory read through the comments shows a high level of shared misogyny coupled with pervasive anxiety over the role and position of men in contemporary society. Underpinning much online bile, however, is a shared awareness of the requirements of masculinity and anxiety over their perceived loss of white men's decreasing status. And there are ample comments that hint at radicalization.

When Iron Man the comic first appeared in the 1960s, the site of Stark's incarceration was not Afghanistan, but <u>Vietnam</u>, or rather Sin-Cong (spelled as Siancong in that version). Not surprisingly, the setting and time merely reflect another controversial US military incursion: the war in Vietnam.

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[17] Roblou, Yann. "COMPLEX MASCULINITIES: THE SUPERHERO IN MODERN AMERICAN MOVIES." Culture, Society and Masculinities 4 (2012): 76-91.

[18] Susan Jeffords, The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press) 1989: 51.

[19] Ging, D. (2019). Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, *22*(4), 638–657. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401

So, perhaps, a good starting point when rewriting and recalibrating a Marvel staple would be to not blatantly other and demonize another culture. Instead, one may imagine that *Iron Man*—or any superhero, given recent history—may have enough battles to fight within the borders of the U.S. Perhaps a hero that fights an insurrection? Or one involving reproductive rights. Or equality. Oh, wait a minute. Even *Black Panther* (2018) introduces a gun-toting Boko Haram-esque mob shouting "Wallahi—I will kill her" at a hostage. So even in a highly stylized fantasy world, the "War on Terror" as an expression of American political paranoia remains a bankable backdrop when it comes to Muslims.

Iron Man fulfills a list of essential elements that make up the "Paranoid Style in American Politics," as explained by Hofstadter in his 1964 Harpers article, writing that, "we are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the

rest of us, but by his fantasies as well."[20] Cultural critic, Henry Giroux, writes, "films do more than entertain; they offer up subject positions, mobilize desires, influence us unconsciously and help to construct the landscape of our culture."[21]

But, *Iron Man* does what it says on the DVD box. It is likable, and that is part of the problem. It's harder to dislike a toxic man when he is charming, and, as Roger Ebert pointed out in his review of *Iron Man,* Robert Downey Jr as Stark is relatable and likable, despite what his character actually says. Stark's dialogue is sometimes caustic, and many of his barbs feel weirdly improvised. If anything, director John Favreau and actor Robert Downey Jr seem hellbent on convincing the viewer of Stark's like-ability so as to soften the brazenly jingoistic tone of the film.

For Giroux, film as a form of public learning, synthesizes aspects of politics and entertainment while laying claim to collective memory, albeit highly individualized based on our location and orientation to the subject. What is required, perhaps, as writers or artists, is a degree of collective responsibility and nimble responsiveness to the need for media literacy that takes into account *how* messaging enters, shapes, and possibly disrupts, lives. The worrying reality, however, is that film seems to establish shared grammar informed by commercial considerations and expectations.

In and effort to understand the film text it helps to work with small "snapshots" and evaluate these compact sections contextually for hints or clues could reveal more about the project. An example:

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[20] Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, vol. November 1964, 1 Nov. 1964. *harpers.org*, https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

[21] Giroux, Henry A. "Breaking into the Movies: Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film." Policy Futures in Education 9.6 (2011): p 687.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

Mr. Stark! Christine Everheart, Vanity Fair magazine.

Can I ask you a couple of questions?

HOGAN

[whispers to Stark]

She's cute.

TONY STARK

[whispers to Hogan]

She's alright.

[turns around]

TONY STARK

Hi!

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

Hi.

TONY STARK

Yeah. Okay, go.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

You've been called the Da Vinci of our time.

What do you say to that?

TONY STARK

Absolutely ridiculous. I don't paint.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

And what do you say to your other nickname, the Merchant of Death?

TONY STARK

That's not bad. Let me guess... Berkeley?

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

Brown, actually.

TONY STARK

Well, Ms. Brown. It's an imperfect world, but it's the only one we got.

I guarantee you the day weapons are no longer needed to keep the peace,

I'll start making bricks and beams for baby hospitals.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

Rehearse that much?

TONY STARK

Every night in front of the mirror before bedtime.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

I can see that.

TONY STARK

I'd like to show you firsthand.

This short exchange between Everheart and Stark highlights a few *Iron Man* challenges. The dialogue

provides a glimpse of a time before "othering" and before #MeToo. A time where Islamophobia is

baked in, American exceptionalism is de rigueur, and intellectualism is frowned on as a vestige of liberal elitism—a pre-woke world. It is a study in <u>critical whiteness</u> from a masculine perspective.

Reporter, Christine Everheart, works for Vanity Fair. Nothing wrong with that per se, but the publication is hardly the New York Times. Would Peter Parker, for example, work for Vanity Fair? At several points, Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze comes to mind as the prevailing misogynistic culture at Stark Industries seems to objectify women.

Elsewhere by comparison, Pepper Potts, Stark's personal assistant, is seemingly one of the few women *not* alienated by Stark's brand of narcissism, and she seems to see the authentic Tony underneath his monied veneer.

A possible avenue is to explore how Potts' affection—and view of Stark—could soften his edges, so to speak, or at the very least, make him less of a jerk. Potts is more of a traditional maternal figure than she perhaps realizes. From the viewer's perspective her job as "secretary" reads as "caretaker." The character may be better positioned as less submissive to Stark, and less seemingly prone to her agency being so dependent on Stark. Does Potts need to constantly turn to Stark for approval?

Iranian Geopolitician Dr. Morteza Ghourchi writes that, "throughout history, governments have allied closely with film production companies, including Hollywood, because of the potential of the cinema media, probably because they believed that films could tell the truth in light of the existing political situation, and thus used cinema to manipulate the public opinion, especially in times of crisis or war.[22]

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[22] Ghourchi, Morteza. "The Role of Hollywood Cinema in Geopolitical Representation of the Middle East." *Geopolitics Quarterly*, Volume 16, no. No 4, 2021, pp. 10–35., https://doi.org/10.4000/abstractairanica.38194.

There can be little doubt as to the nationality or religion of the terrorist group in *Iron Man*. Named Ten Rings, the group appears mostly of Middle Eastern descent, with the majority speaking Arabic while sharing the visual marker of a darker complexion. Ten Rings' flag features scimitars crossing while the group is featured in suitably desert-like mises-en-scène, again underlining a racial component.

As part of an ongoing series of articles on Perspectives on the War or Terror, Riz Test co-founder Shaf Choudry, writes, "Hollywood deemed Iraqi blood as a necessary pre-requisite to alleviate American collective guilt regarding the role of their Army in invading Iraq and its subsequent devastation." Ten Rings' members are straight from the ISIS/Al-Qaeda cliché playbook, in one scene a bloodied Tony Stark is surrounded by "Arab" terrorists who aim their guns at him. The scene is styled to invoke a collective Western trigger, that of execution footage where American or British nationals are attacked and held captive by groups such as ISIS. One of the "bad guys" is filming the scene. We know what this means, and we fear the worst.

But, as Mirrlees points out, beyond the visuals signaling terrorist threat, and what by 2008 had become a problematic doctrine for the Bush administration, *Iron Man* is a long piece of PR. Mirrlees suggests that the film industry, especially in the United States, is caught in a form of symbiosis and that "Iron Man is part and product of the global market dominance of Hollywood, the DOD's promotional and R&D goals and imperial ideology" (p 11). *Iron Man* seems to want to reframe the Iraq war. Stark, for example, is subjected to waterboarding while in prison. Suffice to say the notorious form of torture is closely linked with facilities such as Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

In one scene, Iron Man destroys people of color in their own country, ostensibly for being terrorists, commenting that his judicious deployment of violence is "not bad", another example of Stark's

continual attempt at coolness and humor. Arriving home, he demands a cheeseburger: a feel-good

meal. It lands on the heavy side.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

[exasperated]

All I'm looking for is a straight answer.

TONY STARK

OK, here's a straight answer.

My old man had a philosophy: peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

That's a great line, coming from a guy selling the sticks.

TONY STARK

My father helped defeat Nazis. He worked on the Manhattan Project.

A lot of people, including your professors at Brown, would call that being a hero.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

And a lot of people would also call that war-profiteering.

TONY STARK

Tell me,

[removing his shades]

do you plan to report on the millions we've saved by advancing medical technology

or kept from starvation with our intelli-crops?

All those breakthroughs, military funding, honey.

CHRISTINE EVERHEART

Have you ever lost an hour of sleep in your life?

TONY STARK

I'd be prepared to lose a few with you.

It soon becomes apparent that *Iron Man* is a foreign policy statement wrapped in a 007/Playboy fantasy. And a show of military power, partly because, at its core, this is a film for boys, from occasional music references to James Bond (the name Pepper Potts also has a 007 feel to it), to the toxic masculinity of Stark, and his <u>douchebaggery</u>. But part of it relates to the concept of American <u>exceptionalism</u>, defined as "the belief that the United States represents the apex of civilization" in the world. A world in which the USA prevails, and is better off because of it. Add to this fact that Stark has a white savior complex. But in a narcissistic way. He is the man who will destroy terrorists while saving innocent Afghani kids from Ten Rings terrorists.

Perhaps even more than *Spider-Man* (2002), *Iron Man* leans into the Cinema of Attractions. It is a spectacle of visual effects. Mirrlees, however, sees the complication and the risk of oversimplification presented by *Iron Man* in that the film, at its core, comments on the journey of a genius. Stark faces the fact that his inventions are not complicit in solving existential problems and that it is causal to many of those problems. If Stark has an amelioration characteristic, it's not he is a superhero. Instead, it's that he, as a person, wants to do better. Or, at least, feel better about trying.

In short, then, much of *Iron Man* can be renegotiated and retooled: the sexism, the objectification, the othering. But many will claim "boys will be boys." That their jokes and worldview are under attack: misunderstood. That cancel culture is at war with masculinity, and that anything less is a liberal (read socialist) move. What cannot be overlooked, however, is that Tony Stark's selective

moral outrage is positioned as a white man's right to destruction, cantilevered on his performative

stabs at humanitarianism.

On *The Dark Knight* (2008)

"Black athletes are often portrayed as gods—though not always saints. They're gravity-defying (Air Jordan), invincible (Iron Mike), supercharged (if Usain Bolt's last name didn't exist, we would have had to invent it), or all-around supernatural (Magic Johnson)," writes *Slate's* Matthew Hutson. In the same article, sociologist Matthew Hughey notes how "at the turn of the 20th century Blacks began succeeding at popular sports, and commentators began to emphasize white cognitive superiority in contrast to the supposedly savage and unbridled physical superiority of Blacks." Hughey further identifies the phenomenon as a "popular culture narrative of 'Black brawn' versus 'white brains.'"

But it's not just us, and not just our films or current culture, that are to blame. Many of our mythologies around Blackness are byproducts—leftovers—of the transatlantic slave trade. A book on the medical care of the enslaved claims that enslaved Black people contained "sensibilities, both of their minds and bodies... much less exquisite than our own." The writer continues that these enslaved people were uniquely positioned "to endure, with few expressions of pain, the accidents of nature."[23] It's also not the only example of such "science," an 1811 treatise on planting techniques declaring enslaved Black people impervious to fever, strangers to biliousness, and less prone to disease.[24]

All of this translates into a health crisis for Black Americans. The offending white officers are seldom held accountable. Even Black children are deemed deserving of lethal force by police and jurors.

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[23] Collins, Dr. Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies. J. Barfield, 1803.

[24] Burke, Joanna. The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers. Oxford University Press, 2014.

It gets worse. Behavioral scientist Kelly Hoffman's 2016 study revealed that "a substantial number of white laypeople and medical students and residents hold false beliefs about biological differences between Blacks and whites and demonstrates that these beliefs predict racial bias in pain perception and treatment recommendation accuracy." Hoffman also found that pain treatment methodologies differed, based on "false beliefs about biological differences between Blacks and whites." Hoffman's study has significant implications, including COVID-19 testing and treatment, hospitalization rates, and even the provision of therapeutics and pain management during childbirth.

In 2014, researchers Kelly Hoffman and Sophie Trawalter of the University of Virginia, and Adam Waytz of Northwestern University, launched a series of *Implicit Association Tests* that challenges prevailing understanding of race, bias, musculature, genital heft, and pain thresholds.[25]

During the Implicit Association Tests, white respondents linked "words associated with the supernatural, (ghost, paranormal, spirit, wizard, supernatural, magic, mystical), to pictures of Black people." Respondents connected "seven 'human words,' (person, individual, humanity, people, civilian, mankind, citizen), to pictures of white people."

In another test, respondents were given images of a white person and a Black person, then asked to choose one after considering the following questions:

1. Which person "is more likely to have superhuman skin that is thick enough that it can withstand the pain of burning hot coals?"

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[25] Waytz, A., Hoffman, K. M., & Trawalter, S. (2015). A Superhumanization Bias in Whites' Perceptions of Blacks. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*(3), 352–359. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614553642.

2. Which person "is more capable of using their supernatural powers to suppress hunger and thirst?"

3. Which person "is more capable of using supernatural powers to read a person's mind by touching the person's head?"

4. Which person "is more capable of surviving a fall from an airplane without breaking a bone through the use of supernatural powers?"

5. Which person "has supernatural quickness that makes them capable of running faster than a fighter jet?"

6. Which person "has supernatural strength that makes them capable of lifting up a tank?"

Respondents overwhelmingly selected the image of a Black person almost every time.

Why does this matter? Because Superhumanization Bias is an extension of the Magical Negro trope, Spike Lee's now-infamous comment on "magical, mystical Negroes who show up as some sort of spirit or angel, but only to benefit the white characters." This bias, rooted in a notion that Black people possess mystical and extrasensory powers, has led to a perception/expectation that Black people possess special abilities. Consequently, many whites see Black people as stronger, faster, tougher, taller, bigger; and able to run, jump, and reach with greater results. Super athletes, in other words.

On the surface, some may try to sell this as a good thing and that it approximates something that seems respect-ish. The truth is, however, Superhumanization stems from the same biases that inform tropes around Black aggression, physicality, and sexuality. These tropes have large been installed in white collective consciousness through the portrayal of Black men and women in the

media. Think D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) for starters. Superhumanization fuels irrational fear and paranoia. It is there when Ahmaud <u>Arbery</u>, is hunted and murdered during a racially motivated hate crime while jogging in Satilla Shores, a neighborhood in Glynn County, Georgia. And Eric <u>Garner</u>. And George <u>Floyd</u>.

Evidence of Superhumanization Bias surrounds us. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has demonstrated how greater accountability for the deaths of Black men and women at the hands of law enforcement is desperately required. There is implicit risk that the movement is being reduced to a politically contested slogan, its message largely neutered by naysayers and vehement denialism on the right. But the truth is that even at BLM rallies, police use <u>disproportionate</u> force, including tear gas, rubber <u>bullets</u>, and, on occasion, live <u>ammunition</u>, into protesting crowds. In an <u>NPR</u> interview researcher Hoffman states how "whites are more likely to tolerate police brutality against Blacks - and again, that might be because they think of them as super-human."

Meanwhile, COVID-19 aggressively claimed asymmetrically high <u>numbers</u> of Black lives. Add to this the racial factors that affect health outcomes, systemic inequality, and disproportionate imprisonment of Black people in the US, and a pattern starts to emerge.

In short, then, we have to cautiously engage with contemporary advertisements and discourses surrounding athletes, especially Black ones. Although they are portrayed as superhuman and gladiatorial, they are still subject to pain, and yes, their lives matter.

Beyond the Imagined Community

"Fame is a fickle food / Upon a shifting plate / Whose table once a / Guest but not / The second time is set.
Whose crumbs the crows inspect / And with ironic caw / Flap past it to the Farmer's Corn – / Men eat of it and die."

– Emily Dickinson

Once I have a kid I'm not going to be on Instagram. You know, I'll probably delete my Instagram and just… I don't know, live life.

– Kylie Jenner

It is permissible even for a dying hero to think before he dies how men will speak of him hereafter. His fame lasts perhaps two thousand years. And what are two thousand years?... What, indeed, if you look from a mountain top down the long wastes of the ages? The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare.

- Virginia Woolf

True story: during his 1966 campaign, incumbent California Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown frequently attacked Ronald Reagan's image—and past—as Hollywood celebrity. In one campaign commercial, a stern voice intoned, "Ronald Reagan has played many roles. This year he wants to play Governor. Can you afford the price of admission?" Then, appearing at an elementary school (also

filmed for a TV spot), Brown threw even more shade when he said, "you know I'm running against

an actor. Remember this: You know who shot Abraham Lincoln, don't you?" The students laughed

nervously. "An actor shot Lincoln," he said. Brown's stunt backfired when the electorate viewed the

blow as too low, sending Reagan to the Governor's mansion.[26]

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard suggests a culture dominated by "simulacra" is incapable of

distinguishing between the real and the illusion.[27] But Baudrillard doesn't call our society fake. He

goes further. Baudrillard suspects we have lost the ability to tell original from artifice. In "Simulacra

and Simulations" he writes:

> "The objective profile of the United States, then, may be traced throughout
>
> Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its
>
> values are exalted here, in miniature and comic-strip form. Embalmed and pactfied.
>
> Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland (L. Marin does it
>
> well in *Utopies, jeux d'espaces*): digest of the American way of life, panegyric to
>
> American values, idealized transposition of a contradictory reality. To be sure.
>
> But this conceals something else, and that "ideological" blanket exactly serves to
>
> cover over a third-order simulation: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is
>
> the "real" country, all of "real" America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are
>
> there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence,
>
> which is carceral).
>
> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real,
>
> when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real,

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[26] Dallek, Matthew. *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

[27] Merriam-Webster defines the simulacrum as **"**an insubstantial form or semblance of something, or a trace.

but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a

false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no

longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle."[28]

For Baudrillard, the simulacrum is a degraded copy of a copy. By contrast, Jean Deleuze views the

simulacrum as imbued with—some—positive power, "which interrupts the relation between original

and copy." Deleuze uses Pop Art, which "pushed the copy so far it became a simulacrum, an image

without resemblance, e.g. Andy Warhol's famous Campbell's Soup prints," to underscore his point.[29]

But it's not just about "fake" and bona fide fame. When American historian Daniel J. Boorstin coins

the term "the pseudo-event," and invents the phrase "famous for being famous," he essentially

describes the naissance of postmodernism.[30] For Boorstin, "human pseudo-events" are not noted

for sacrifice or devotion to cause. Instead, they are positioned by image consultants and reputation

management practitioners who work tirelessly at manipulating the public persona of human

products through "pseudo-events." The result, Boorstin says, raises consumer expectations to

unrealistic levels. "Never have people been more the master of their own environment," he writes,

"yet never have a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never have a people expected so

much more than the world could offer." (4)

A recent opinion on issues around privacy by social media theorists Nathan Jurgenson and

sociologist P. J. Rey insists that publicity and privacy are not diametric. While not doubting the

internet's role in our increasingly public lives, they posit the existence of "a dialectical relationship,

where privacy and publicity are deeply intertwined, mutually reinforcing, and perhaps both

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[28] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation. www.press.umich.edu*, https://www.press.umich.edu/9900/simulacra_and_simulation.

[29] https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100507502

[30] Boorstin, Daniel Joseph (1961). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America.* New York: Vintage.

increasing as digital information grows more ubiquitous."[31] Jurgenson and Rey point at sociologist Erving Goffman's writing on the "front and back stage." To Goffman, the "front stage" is public and designed to be seen by onlookers, where individuals incorporate "certain scripts appropriate to the institutions that they operate within" while retaining "idealized versions of the self." The "back stage" is somewhat more private. Celebrities, Goffman felt, use the recessed stage to "keep tight control over images [outfits, bodies, sexual encounters, etc.] not because they are trying to minimize publicity and maximize privacy. . . rather, to release it in a manner that maximizes publicity."

It is a view shared by James Bond actor Daniel Craig when he encourages us to "look at the Kardashians, they are worth millions." He continues, "I don't think they were that badly off to begin with but now look at them. . . You see that and you think, 'What, you mean all I have to do is behave like a f***ing idiot on television and then you'll pay me millions?'" The Kardashians, who practically invented social influencing, Craig appears to suggest, live deliberately on Goffman's "front stage," a thing that the private Craig disagrees with. "I think there's a lot to be said for keeping your own counsel," Craig says. "It's not about being afraid to be public with your emotions or about who you are and what you stand for. But if you sell it off it's gone."[32]

But what role does the consumer play in this interaction, and do they even have a chance? Boorstin places some blame at the door of commerce that seeks to commodify celebrity, but ultimately, it is consumer consumption that stimulates popularity. If the public refuses to buy, mass—and social—media cannot demand or bully an observer into becoming a disciple. Politicians and influencers certainly sway the public, especially in a hyper-connected era where what they say or do may be well-

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[31] Nathan Jurgenson and P.J. Rey. "The Fan Dance: How Privacy Thrives in an Age of Hyper-\Publicity." Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and Their Alternatives. Ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch. (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 62-63.

[32] Olivia Williams, "Daniel Craig Calls Kim Kardashian A 'F**king Idiot.'" November 30, 2011 (The Huffington Post UK. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/11/29/danielcraig-kim-kardashian_n_1117992.html)

nigh inescapable. Still, in the end, the voter or the user determines the failure—or rise—of celebrity or political careers (117).

An example of this is at the Supreme Court confirmation hearing of candidate Ketanji Brown Jackson in March 2022. Senator Ted Cruz pursued his typical belligerent interrogation style, going "over his allotted 20-minute time as he aggressively questioned Jackson on her handling of child pornography cases."[33] Cruz leaned back in his chair after a tense exchange with Chairman Durbin and did what any twink with a reputation to manage would do: he took his phone and searched for his name. On Twitter. Cruz was checking the level of buzz he had created. Cynical, yes. Unexpected or even new? No. Something that South African-born Elon Musk is intensely aware of.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wrote a mid-forties essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," on the danger of mass culture. As part of The Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer viewed the entire culture industry as engaged in pressurizing conformity where "mass media, educational institutions, the family, government agencies, industry, religious groups and other social institutions elicit support for such hegemonic relations through patterns of communication and material reward" (378).[34]

Adorno and Horkheimer, and Italian journalist and sociologist Francesco Alberoni, would later argue that "to supply the masses with an escape into fantasy and an illusion of mobility," meant that control is engineered through mass media's promotion of certain ideals and cultural events while limiting access to information. They argue that social structure is self-designed to manage people and their aspirations (380). The Frankfurt School warned of a society where control is subtle. A

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[33] https://www.chron.com/politics/article/Ted-Cruz-Twitter-checks-phone-Ketanji-Brown-17025661.php

[34] Artz and Ortega-Murphy, Cultural Hegemony in the United States.

society where it is not firearms or force that guarantee cooperation but rather a sustained stoking of class envy and craven yearning. It was a system of distraction.

And today, even more than in Weimar Germany, technology provides compelling tools.

Social and mass media shape ideals and ideologies, and those who most compellingly personify or inspire beauty or intellect are vaulted into celebrity status. The standards of the dominant class and instantly transmitted, intoned, and reinforced. Technology has released the wanna-be or sycophant from the burden of mass media costs and its—expensive—barrier to world domination. Now, anyone with a phone, access to WiFi, and enough chutzpah, has sufficient tools to go viral. And not just local.

The advent of "reality TV," viral video as advertising, and brand ambassadorship on multiple platforms, have made our understanding—and tolerance—of "celebrity" significantly broader. Anyone can rocket into the collective conscious, and what was once taboo or private is now dating currency. Besides, celebrity sex tapes are so 2004.

Speaking of complex identity constructions, a lifetime ago in the 90s, MIT's Sherry Turkle performed the "most often cited study of postmodern online identity." Turkle's participants were encouraged to develop an online "self" based on how they wanted to be perceived.[35] The core tenet of Turkle's findings is that we easily inhabit multiple characters, each drawing on hitherto hidden parts of our personality projected into complex personas (p 192). We exist IRL and meta. Turkle's study recalls Erich Fromm writing in *Man for Himself* that "Man's main task in life is to give birth to

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[35] Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995)

himself, to become what he potentially is. The most important product of his own effort is his own personality." [36]

Add to this our insatiable appetite for scandal and the fabricated outrage we muster when narrative runs counter to the convictions espoused by our Breitbart or MSNBC imagined communities. Nowhere does this unholy alliance of social media and anti-social nativist thinking find more fertile soil than politics. Jack Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jesse Ventura, JD Vance, Hillary ("Bengazi!") Clinton, Kari Lake…some old, some new, a few presidents, a few governors, some senators, some hopefuls, and a secretary of state. What could bind them? An obeisance to quasi-celebrity that, over time, had erased already-blurry lines between politics and entertainment.

It was Dwight Eisenhower who ushered a branded iteration of campaigning and politics. For his 1952 Presidential campaign, Eisenhower slapped a snappy slogan, "I Like Ike," on random merch. Irving Berlin composed a campaign tune, and Disney created an Eisenhower commercial—one of the first-ever TV campaign ads.

By the 1960s, Hollywood and Washington started aligning. Candidate Kennedy called his political mission the New Frontier, a Western nod, evoking pioneers and horseback heroes, while first lady, Jackie, hinted that the media call the administration and its various appendages *Camelot*, the title of a 1960 Broadway musical on the marriage of England's King Arthur to Guinevere. This blur of politics, celebrity, media access, and policy was a radical departure from the administrations of Truman and Eisenhower. In 1964, a year after the Kennedy assassination and the live-on-television shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby, Bob Dylan sang "The times they are a-changin.'" They were.

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[36] Funk, Rainer, and Erich Fromm. *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*. Routledge, 2020, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203721339.

From Reagan's infamous Freudian 1988 <u>slip</u>, that "facts are stupid things" to his White House press secretary Larry Speake's desk sign that, "You don't tell us how to stage the news, we won't tell you how to cover it," the assumption had become that politics are *supposed* to be staged-managed and presented by politicians, before disseminated by mass media.[37] Figures such as Trump understand this concept well and consequently wield social media with breathtaking skill. "Reagan's performance success was," as Timothy Raphael writes, "*normative* not aberrant, a paradigmatic expression of the seminal role of the body electric in a fully dramatized society."[38]

But it's not just Reagan or Trump who have added media edge to their personas. Hollywood helped Obama's election significantly, and by his election, several science fiction films had featured a Black president. Perhaps because the genre is so adept at future-casting, even initiating events and movements, it prepared the US psychologically for Obama's rise. For his part, Obama had to refine his online and on-screen persona to match that of actors such as Morgan Freeman, a feat he achieved with relative ease.

Obama also had a superb role model in real-life activist-turned-president Nelson Mandela. Mandela's presidency was one of mass semiotics as he sought to keep South Africa from descending into civil war, seeing him famously don the Springbok rugby jersey at the 1995 Rugby World Cup final in Cape Town. It was a moment of realness seared into the memory of every South African. I was there. Mandela was verbal viral in a time before online viral, apps, or even phones that did not resemble a brick. The man and the event went viral as instant mythology—the stuff of legends.

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[37] Mark Hertsgaard, "How Reagan Seduced Us: Inside the President's Propaganda Factory," *Village Voice* (New York City), 25 September 1984

[38] Raphael, Timothy. The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance. University of Michigan Press, 2009. ACLS Humanities EBook, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.331702.

Who needs Tweets and TikToks when you can tell stories about a real hero? One made real because

he made us feel.

Do heroes still matter?

Long before Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (2nd century AD), Einhard's *The Life of Charlemagne* (roughly 817 AD), or Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791)—all landmarks of the art of the biography—the episodes that constitute a life have been part of the storytelling tradition. This interest in the minutiae, motivations, actions, and momentous events has led to varied forms, including the salacious unauthorized, the truthy exposé, the confessional memoir, and, of course, the pathography. Incidentally, the word pathography also describes writing about disease (Gr. -Pathos – disease; *graphos*, to write or writer), and so it seems fitting that the pathography dwells on the decrepit and sullied. The storied side of the diseased and paranoid state indeed takes up much of the oxygen in the room, leaving many a little skeptical of Pollyanna spin.

It is not for nothing that much of social media, including Facebook and Instagram, take on autobiographical function as users endlessly capture and disseminate half-formed opinions and duckface selfies. These micro-biographies are in constant progress and, while a world away from the Boswellian model, they document a process of—some—research, implied narrative, and stabs at portraiture.

And it makes sense. Few are interested in the interior lives of anyone else and refuse to "look under the hood," so to speak. The biographical film has become highly profitable and awarded. Think Freddie Mercury, Judy Garland, Elton John, and Patrizia Reggiani. Maria Callas is about to get the treatment, and already the level of navel-gazing by Angelina Jolie, as she prepares to channel the diva, promises months of social coverage and shares.

But what about everyday heroes? The great and the good of the hood. *The New York Times* publishes around 1,200 obituary biographies each year. It is free for your family if the *Times* chooses to write it

about you because they view it as news. If your demise is not news, the biography is not complimentary. Remembering the dead is expensive—unless you expire in Iceland.

The widely-read Icelandic newspaper, *Morgunbladid,* prints obituary biographies for free, and they have a generous word limit. It's not exceptional to see multiple obits for the same deceased in the same issue. It's a case of an imagined community growing and pulsating around a fresh-and-blood community—family—as things that coalesce the society are shared. Besides expected biographical information, the community augments collective memory of the dead by sharing poignant recollections. For the community, the public obituary biography has become art. And this biographical art form ushered in a different—new—way of expressing grief. These "letters to the dead" are inextricably linked to the bereaved's shared history with the deceased while dealing with a disrupted present and diminished future. It merges collective and personal experience.[39]

Sometimes, outside feel-good obits or the short 'n sharp, online biographies become sites where lived experience and guerrilla journalism intersect. Biographies that bear witness and augment a basic, or in many cases mass endorsed—as opposed to authorized—understanding of the hero. And sometimes these hybrid models create hero mythology where none excited, making greyheads explode.

A example of the changing face—and textures—around biography is the death and resurrection of George Floyd. Even now, most only know Floyd for how he died: under the knee of a policeman in Minneapolis, Minn.

Floyd's death was captured digitally on a smartphone. Darnella Frazier was 17 when she took the video that would go viral and end up as key evidence against his killer, Minneapolis police officer

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[39] Árnason, Arnar, et al. "Letters to the Dead: Obituaries and Identity, Memory and Forgetting in Iceland." *Mortality*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2003, p. 268.

Derek Chauvin. "Even though this was a traumatic life-changing experience for me, I'm proud of myself. If it weren't for my video, the world wouldn't have known the truth. I own that. My video didn't save George Floyd, but it put his murderer away and off the streets," Frazier said in an Instagram post. This post is part of her—unintended but consequential—social biography, and in a much more fragmented way, that of Floyd. And Chauvin, for what it's worth.

Over the last few years, the collective output of the broader community of protesters and journalists around the world started to populate a mass of information on the life of Floyd designed to help us understand who he was. That he wasn't a psychopath out to harm or disadvantage others, but he represented a largely invisible community. One with challenges—yes, drugs—but also police frequently profile and arrest easy targets. His "social media biography" pointed out that Floyd was once arrested for trespassing while walking in his neighborhood. He had been stopped over twenty times in his life, a few of those the victim of corrupt policing.

Floyd is also the embodiment of Black superhumanization, and Frazier's short film bearing witness is a study in hero/antihero dynamics depending on who you ask and how much significance either take on. In a perverse sense it echoes Hassler-Forest writing that "these superhero narratives, we sympathize with the main characters not because of their ideals but, on the contrary, precisely because they have abundant flaws that make them relatable." (p 112) And social media bears this out. Chauvin is lauded as hero on sites where light doesn't reach, while Floyd's hero status is a sometimes thing, again, depending on the site, group, or outlet. That Floyd is a symbol is widely acknowledged. To some, Darnella Frazier is the true hero of this story. It bears mentioning that Chauvin's body camera provides a harrowing visual record of a type of toxicity—call it masculine, or white, or bad-apple, it really doesn't matter—that is hard to watch.

The public biography of Floyd became even more poignant when the media accessed Floyd's diary in which he wrestled with his past mistakes and his decisions. His writing reveals a man who struggled to overcome addiction. And one that wanted to liberate himself from his past brushes with the law. He is flawed, but to many, he starts to resemble a hero, though not one that resembles the Gibbon mold.

To that end, Robert Samuels of *The Washington Post* and his colleague Toluse Olorunnipa have authored a biography, *His Name Is George Floyd: One Man's Life And The Struggle For Racial Justice*, that tells a story about racism. And how it shaped the trajectory of Floyd's life over 150 years. "It impacted his beginning and made him essentially come into the world born with two strikes as someone who was Black and poor in America," Olorunnipa explains.

All of it, the book, the sites, the social media, the countless articles, and persistent news channel coverage of a murder, constitute a collective—ongoing, but changing— biography as a site of memory wrapped in a history lesson. In this instance, the complete and complex narrative is the biography of George Floyd, but it also represents a pathography. That of the United States.

POV in Film

It's all about luring the viewer into a narrative. In his engaging series of articles on cinematography, Jourdan Aldredge writes, "from a basic definition standpoint, a point of view shot is a short film scene that shows what a character (the subject) is looking at (represented through the camera)" (Aldredge).

A POV shot introduces a societal worldview in *V for Vendetta* (2005), which shows a spoof of the High Chancellor on television. The viewpoint underlines how the people of England are not in lockstep with the High Chancellor nor as submissive as some think. The shot suggests England is scared and intimidated by the Chancellor's power. The POV alludes to the possibility that left to their own devices, people lack the power of conviction and cohesion. The actual political viewpoints of the imagined community are pervasive in *V for Vendetta,* relying on group dynamic and shared experience (Anderson). However brief or heightened those experiences may be, as this example shows through the use of a diegetic Benny Hill soundtrack. Laughter may not be medicine but rather a shared moment—and apologies to Kundera—where laughter is akin to forgetting.

The POV shot suggests a relatable sense of unity in fear. That perhaps we are afraid of changing something on our own and while we may enjoy parody from the safe viewpoint of the sofa, we do little to emulate it. Resistance is tough.

Elsewhere, also in *V for Vendetta,* a POV shot introduces an invitation to complicity. An opportunity to be part of resistance. Through V's perspective, the audience is co-opted and denied an opportunity for objective clarity—or rejection—so confident is the director in our support of V's emotional and mental condition. By extension, we become part of the notion that V is not a man, but an idea. One that we are part of. POV, as this scene shows, can be coercive.

By contrast, given its long takes and deliberate pacing, Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* (2000) uses POV more as tool for immersion than creating an imagined community.

Shyamalan uses POV to establish and develop character and his long takes shift from one state of awareness to another. Set in a hospital reception, a shot pivots twice to become David Dunn's POV; then, when Dunn pursues the Orange Man, the secondary antagonist, the shot keeps returning to Dunn's POV. For all *Unbreakable's* weaving of POV, in one of the tensest scenes in *Unbreakable*, Dunn enters a home that has been invaded by the Orange Man, Shyamalan uses a single POV shot. And it is this limited use of POV that encourages greater immersion on the side of the viewer—POV forces the viewer into the role of helpless observer.

Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* pushes POV boundaries, specifically with the character of Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson,) who utilizes POV to negotiate space and time. In his hospital scene, having fallen down subway stairs, Price stares and thinks while the doctor lists the breaks in Price's body. The shot closes in on Price, then on his one eye, deeper into that eye—deeper and closer—his stare seemingly transfixed in sheer determination. Price seems to metaphysically transport while a slow dissolve accommodates the shift from Price's eye to the logo of a therapy clinic as we reach the goal of his scheme.

Shyamalan pushes past the eye and a circular logo shape into an interior shot of the clinic. This time, instead of a dissolve, it's a change of focus that reveals the character Audrey who looks back at him. In the next shot, Audrey is next to Price, greeting him, and the conceptual POV signifying and illustrating Price's thinking and willpower have given way to a subjective POV. We do not see Price in this interaction, underlining his transcendence as visualized by him in the previous scene.

Another quick word on Superhumanization

Reading and re-reading Peter H. Gibbon's *A Call to Heroism,* similar messages appear. On an emotional level, Gibbon rejects the current strain of anti-hero sentiment, writing that "biography today is rarely about greatness," and that "at best, it displays a dispassionate balance. More often, it focuses on failure…and weakness and unveils the intimate life—slighting artistic accomplishment, scientific discovery, and political achievement. At worst, contemporary biographers self-righteously excoriate any hint of impurity, prejudice, sexism, or hypocrisy."

Gibbon echoes Roland Barthes' view that "materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth (113). Consequently, Gibbon appropriates aspects of heroism he feels comfortable with and will further his narrative—that of "renewing America's Vision of Greatness," as the dust jacket states. Writing in a Harvard Education Letter, Gibbon feels "anti-heroes permit us to explore our dark side safely. But anti-heroes can be dangerous when, instead of seeing them as characters to be wary of, we are seduced into antisocial behavior" (Gibbon)

A superhero function in the American tradition is to advocate for, and protect, "truth, justice, and the American way." What makes *Iron Man* such a perfect fit for Gibbon's hero model is his conviction in his nation's cultural belief system, specifically as it benefits the nation itself. In a post-9/11 context, nationalism based on the "strong hero rubric" is unifying, in line with the traditional role of media and comics when the nation faces peril. *Iron Man* promotes a uniquely "American way" that frequently opposes and discounts other cultures, in this instance though Islamophobia. *Iron Man* becomes a site where paranoid white hegemony and exceptionalism meet and collaborate to "other" a mythologized anti-hero, asserting dominance on a global scale.

Occasionally the anti-hero slope can get somewhat slippery as we confront painful—uncomfortable—truths that constitute the hero. Gibbon likes Mandela. But for specific reasons. To Gibbon, Mandela is neutered.

The world of the political center-right is one where figures such as *Iron Man* (2008) may further the exaggerated goals of the military-industrial complex under pretext of events such as 9/11. It's a world where Black folk exist, and are visible, but in narrowly defined spaces. Reflecting Umberto Eco's view of Superman, Gibbon's appreciation of Mandela is somewhat contra-narrative. To Gibbon, Mandela is a mythic, timeless archetype that has been endlessly renewed into a consumable product. He cannot be allowed to exist or change in measurable ways, and he exists—like Superman—in a perfunctory world, for our benefit. Metropolis is a mythology-as-cautionary-tale built around its self-destruction—of lessons not learned—in much the same way as Apartheid South Africa is doomed to obsolescence. But for Mandela.

Hughey writes that "Black actors are constantly cast as angels, spirits, gods, and other incarnate supernatural forces, they displace the realities of history into more viewer-friendly narratives." To Hughey, the risk is that we are creating the expectation of a "trouble-free and uncomplicated black/white reconciliation." Gibbon's view on the sanitized version of Mandela reflects Hughey's view that a "basic narrative appeals to feelings among whites and blacks alike that there can be racial reconciliation and accord." Mandela is precisely that. Instant reconciliation.

But, to view Mandela as "magical Negro" is a mistake. One that is easy to make.

Gibbon, like most who don't know better, ignores the "armed struggle Mandela." Or the Mandela whom the United States designated a terrorist for fear of his Communist sympathies, a list Mandela was still on as late as 2008—six years *after* Gibbon's "important book on an important subject," as the dust cover endorsement by film critic Michael Medved calls it (Dewey).

Suffice it to say that, for many, Mandela as part-Guerilla fighter, part redemption, AND part-statesman is the ideal version. And more historically accurate.

Hand in hand with the objectification that is the Magical Negro is a risk of Black superhumanization (Waytz). To some extent, *Unbreakable* (2000) raises a challenge: popular media depiction of Black people as supernatural—magical—capable of extrasensory feats withstanding great pain. Magical representations also emerge in media portrayals of Black athletes as possessing superhuman abilities (Glenn).

On a broader societal level, the possibility emerges that superhumanization of Black men and women—both the narrative reliance on the trope and the by-now ingrained expectation of superhuman athleticism and physicality—contributes to the white patriarchy's diminished view of Black pain. Has a failure to truly recognize Black pain—also on screen—reduced real-life white empathy serving as justification for withholding aid when needed?

The Mask of V. And commercial considerations

In 2001, David Lloyd, the man who created the original mask for the V comic strip by Alan Moore, said, "the Guy Fawkes mask has now become a common brand and a convenient placard to use in protest against tyranny—and I'm happy with people using it. It seems quite unique, an icon of popular culture being used this way." He continues that his "feeling is the Anonymous group needed an all-purpose image to hide their identity and also symbolise that they stand for individualism - V for Vendetta is a story about one person against the system" (V).

Ironically, the majority of masks worn around the world by protest movements, from South Africa's "Fees Must Fall" to recent protests in Tehran, are made in China (Suddath). And in the absence of Amazon, an online tutorial in Hong Kong will show the would-be protester how to make and fold their own versions (Leung).

It is worth not that the sheer semiotic reach if the V mask has led Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia to ban the masks outright (Zakaria). Canada has banned the V mask at mass protests (Alter).

The *V* mask is part of a collective awareness that has shifted from film prop based on English history to a potent symbol of resistance and retribution. As an icon, it has represented the events from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, and one may argue that the mask's inherent— guaranteed—anonymity blended with its baked-in anti-establishment credibility have encouraged waves of global political activism. One reviewer (of many) on Amazon comments that the mask is appropriate "to wear during these times of unprecedented government oppression" (Amazon).

But any appreciation of the mask's proliferation and role in social conscience must be viewed against social media as expression of collective meaning and its role in creating instant memory and the speed by which this meaning and memory can spread virally. Using Barthes' mass culture model with the signifier grafted onto mass consciousness, it is unsurprising that the V mask has achieved a

mythology, while suturing meaning into the ideology of the moment (Barthes).

The *V for Vendetta* poster plays into a sense of anarchy and foreboding through use of bold red and black as well as a layout and typeface that recall propaganda art. Initial poster designs focused more on the character of V, showing his knives drawn while not relying on the slogan "Freedom! Forever!" quite yet. Evey (Natalie Portman) takes up real estate when the poster is redeveloped for different markets while the presence of mask-wearing protesters is foregrounded with an outline of a burning London remaining core to visual language. In the lead-up to the film's release, a new poster design is released with three main aspects presented in broad V formation: a shaven Evey, London in flames, and a close-up of the mask.

Finally, as one could reasonably expect, some posters relied exclusively on the V mask in the foreground against a solid black, the mask by now starting to take on its own life as a symbol for change. Meanwhile, the V logo as an inverted "A for Anarchy" has been deployed widely on poster designs, giving the film a recognizable look while shaping anarchistic messaging especially when combined with the mask on the poster, becomes synonymous with anonymous in the process. It's a case of "all things to all people."

South African artist Khaya Witbooi incorporates the iconic V mask in several art pieces. In one, the mask is located to the right on a canvas celebrating the 1988 release of Nelson Mandela from prison in Paarl, South Africa. Mandela's raised arm is chained to a white girl on a swing, carefree in a floral dress. The presence of the V mask is meaningful and ominous: it signals that the freedom of both the white girl and the Black man—Mandela—is not without cost. The mask is both reminder and a threat of vendetta. At least it signals that a certain value has to be placed on Mandela's negotiated status quo. Or that it has to be acknowledged. Respected.

For Witbooi, the mask and its semiotic meaning as defined by the film *V for Vendetta,* become visual shorthand for the things whites fear most: accountability and revenge. When I interviewed Witbooi in 2015, he smiled and quoted, "remember, remember! Freedom is not free."

In retrospect, it seems almost mythological by itself that, at a time of high anti-terrorist legislation, a trademarked superhero smirk should be present at quasi-tectonic shifts in our political and economic landscapes. That our love affair with nihilism would find a novel expression. Even now, as recent events in Tehran show, our response to systems of oppression seem to have evolved, punctuated by the semiotic messages contained by a film prop (Cobiella). Alan Moore calls it, "V for validation" (Moore).

Where is the Big Gay Superhero?

Are superheroes the artistic ejaculations of a society caught in a degenerative moment of reckoning where some level of assertion or reflection is required? A liminal moment, where, suddenly, values have to be determined, considered, weighed, and costumed to underline these values and create a recognizable—acceptable to the hegemony—moral code. And herein lies a wrinkle. In this moment/space—call it liminal, imagined, or arrested—few deviations from a given hegemonic code can exist.

And it's obvious who is excluded from the gestalt: few are black or brown, and even fewer are LGBTQ+. Indeed, it is notable how many of those outside the imagined community of heteronormativity inhabit spaces that oppose white patriarchal value systems often represented by the downright camp, or at least stylized, with exaggerated flamboyance (Sontag).

"Othered" groups outside imagined commodities of acceptability still include BIPOC, reincarnations of tropes including the Tragic Mulatto, the Magical Negro, and the Mammy figure (Bogle). But strides have been made in this regard. Black Panther bears this out. So do James Rhodes (Terence Howard) in *Iron Man* (2008) and Howard's replacement, Don Cheadle, in the 2010 *Iron Man* sequel. But the superhero genre is slow to reflect queer identity.

Superheroes uphold a certain societal status quo, defined by Merriam-Webster as an "existing state of affairs," implying a hostile state or stasis. In a sociological sense, status quo indicates a maintenance of existing values and structures. For status quo to be challenged, social liquidity is implied, either as a culture or a group, with the phrase "status quo" sure to be received negatively by the proponents of social change. Indeed, status quo may be viewed by some as a form of deliberate resistance to social change or progress.

As a non-imaged real community, we have been encouraged to statically label—or self-other—as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+); or

under the umbrella of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE). We are called "sexual minorities" or "men who have sex with men." But these labels and concepts are fast disappearing, and the LGBTQ+ community has made strides toward social and legal tolerance. More than nine million Americans identify as LGBTQ+, yet the Hollywood superhero machine overlooks the existence of queer people. And despite Stan Lee's *X-Men* (2000) doing heavy lifting as metaphor for the "mutant" marginalized, queerness has only been detectable in the subtext. And largely within the domain of the heavy-handed metaphor.

But film—and the superhero genre—is reflective of larger prevailing heterocentrism, steeped in ignorance and the denial of the non-straight and non-cisgender. Hollywood, slow to recover after the Hays Code banned on-screen homosexuality, adopted nods at queerness through tropes that perpetuated effeminacy and flamboyance. Though some depictions of gay men and women have been relatively benign, many representations of queerness in film have been mostly comedic or symbols of depravity, when not portrayed as downright inferior. Although Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman), for sample, is not especially queer-coded, he signals a somewhat ostentatious—colorful —code.

The added problem is that, to many, the LGBTQ+ community has little in the way of a history or recognizable heroes. In *A Call to Heroism,* Peter Gibbon certainly does not pause to count the gay and lesbian heroes of 9/11 or the Second World War. And, in 2022, despite social and legal advances of recent years, Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida, signed a bill into law that prohibits "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards" (Diaz).

It follows then that in the superhero industry, LGBTQ+ folk do not inhabit heroic bodies nor embark on epic adventures. Iron Man's sexual orientation and gender identity have nothing to do with his abilities, so what can be the reasoning to present him as terminally cisgender?

But there is hope, on paper, at least. Most Hollywood superhero franchises have been supplied with comic book queer characters. Marvel Comics and DC Comics have featured numerous LGBTQ+ characters (Belt). Of course, they need to leap off the page and onto the screen…

Interestingly, *V for Vendetta* does not disassociate characters from LGBTQ+ overtones. When Gordon Deitrich (Stephen Fry) outs himself to Evey, he refers to the mask he wears, and it inadvertently (or not) reflects on the masked hero, V:

Gordon Deitrich

You wear a mask for so long, you forget who you were beneath it.

Evey Hammond

Is everything a joke to you, Gordon?

Gordon Deitrich

Only the things that matter.

Dietrich prepares for Evey the same breakfast V made and he greets her with the same jaunty "bonjour mademoiselle." Dietrich also plays Jobim on the stereo, albeit a different song. Still. The scene is shot using near-identical camera angles in a near-identical sequence. Does the parallel treatment reveal something of V and his sexual orientation?

Evey Hammond

This is weird.

Gordon Deitrich

What?

Evey Hammond

The first morning I was with him, he made me eggs just like this.

Gordon Deitrich

Really?

Evey Hammond

I swear.

Gordon Deitrich

That is a strange coincidence. Although, there's an obvious explanation.

Evey Hammond

There is?

Gordon Deitrich

Yes, Evey. I am V. At last you know the truth. You're stunned, I know.

It's hard to believe isn't it, that beneath this wrinkled, well-fed exterior there lies a dangerous killing

machine with a fetish for Fawkesian masks. ¡Viva la revolución!

One mental hurdle for the masses is the hyper-masculinity embodied by characters such as

Superman, Iron Man, and, to a lesser extent Spider-Man, primarily due to his youthfulness and

relatively modest musculature. Certainly, the "Dynamic Duo" Batman and Robin have always had a

"confirmed bachelors who live together" energy, while C.K Robertson also mentions Wertham's

Seduction of the Innocent that mused on Wonder Woman as "lesbian counterpart of Batman"

(McGrath). But none of these have ever been explored on blockbuster level.

Another challenge is the need for homosocial desire, described by Eve Sedgwick as distinct from

homosexual activity. Sedgwick writes that "the model of representation will let us do justice to the

(broad but not infinite or random) range of ways in which sexuality functions as a signifier for

power relations" (Sedgwick).

But here is the wrinkle: under Constitution of the United States, systemic change as a people's right is effected through elected representation. By these standards, any superhero effecting systemic change would no longer be super or a hero; he would be a despot.

In "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant Garde," Gunning writes that "every change in film history implies a change in its address to the spectator, and each period constructs its spectator in a new way" (68). Gunning echoes Foucault's view of the complicated triangulated nature of the spectator/artist/art matrix, but it brings up an uncomfortable truth (or lie). If the time we live in constructs the spectator, is art—and film—just a satisfying record of our manipulation? A visual ontology of our species as we hurtle from one near-extinction event to the next. And so, in some way, a superhero story is no different from the Lascaux handprints; function, fanfare, and "attraction" trappings aside, it is simply a species saying "once, we were here."

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