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**Reluctant Heroes and Itchy Capes: The Ineluctable Desire to Be the Savior**

**Laura D'Olimpio and Michael P. Levine**

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## Abstract

We live in an age of heroes. What is a hero? Why is our need for heroes and our desire to be heroic as insatiable as they are pervasive? Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" and Nietzsche's "Superman" both depict the heroic as involving a commitment to inner knowing along with a faith in one's own abilities, despite being unable to communicate these reasons to anyone else. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche use the notion of "hero" to make a moral claim with respect to how we should lead our lives and endure—even love—the lived human experience. There is no diminishing of the modern appetite to consume and act out "reassuring" narratives about how we are all the hero of our own personal journey. Psychoanalysis gives an account as to why the appeal of the hero is inextricably tied to the human psyche. Jung explains the appeal of heroes in terms of archetypes, and Freud speaks of our orectic natures—nature driven by desire, appetite, and wish-fulfillment. Times of crisis and insecurity will always be coincident with an age of heroes, and the proliferation of heroes in film and television, as well as imaged heroes in real life, suggest these times are troubling if not dire. This paper explores why it is that heroes are always there, indeed must be there, when we need them most and considers the educative potential of such narratives.

## Introduction: Susan Sontag and the 1950s Revisited

In "The Imagination of Disaster," written at or close to the height of the Cold War, Sontag ruminates on what America's interest in, if not preoccupation with, science fiction films tell us about ourselves.[1] Their popularity cannot be explained in terms of their entertainment value alone; or if it can, then why audiences found (and still find) such films entertaining is something that itself needs explanation. Almost all films in the hero genre are also science fiction and are

concerned with disasters of one kind or another. What Sontag has to say about disaster in the 1950s can easily be applied to the seemingly insatiable desire for hero films today. Her account is useful in explaining both what our attractions to them are and relatedly why there is so much interest in—some would say an obsession with—heroes.

Depicted in media like photography, films. and television, utopian and dystopian thought have at least one thing in common. Their visions of either perfected or socially alienated worlds are commonly prompted by criticism of the social/political status quo and point to its reform. For Sontag, science fiction films portray both people's worst nightmares concerning disaster and catastrophe (for example, the end of the world, chaos, enslavement. mutation) and their facile victories over the kinds of moral, political, and social dissolution these films imaginatively depict. Much the same can be said for the current fascination with the hero genre. Sontag does not explicitly attribute such "happy endings" to wish-fulfilling phantasy and ego-protection. She does, however, describe the kinds of fears, existential concerns (like annihilation), and crises of meaning they are designed (purpose built) to allay. The fears are a product of the time—the down and dark side of technology (for example, depersonalization; ambivalence toward science, scientists, and technology) and changes wrought in our working and personal lives by urbanization. In short, then as now, science fiction films and the hero genre (at times a subset of science fiction) are both expressions of deep and genuine worries and of the pressing need to set them to rest imaginatively. The hero genre is indicative of just how worried and disturbed people currently are and highlights what we wish to learn more about--and, as in the 1950s with nuclear war hanging over our heads, rightfully so.

When Sontag claims that "the imagination of disaster does not greatly differ" from one period to another, this is because, psychologically speaking, neither the precipitating concerns

and fears (death, loss of love, meaninglessness, and so forth) nor the ways in which people's minds endeavor[b] to assuage them substantively differ. What is different is the way they are depicted. This is unsurprisingly a function of the political, social, and moral situations and milieus that provide the context in which the imagination of disaster unfolds. In contemporary society, the extent to which the imagination is informed and constructed by the media is unprecedented. How we engage with such media is something educators and citizens must take seriously.

Sontag claims that there is little if any criticism of the real social and political conditions that bring about the fears the films depict.[2] Instead, fantasy operates so as to displace and project the actual causes away from their all-too-human origins into outer space and onto aliens. In a sense, this is the core and raison d'etre for such films. By their very nature, neither science fiction films of the kind Sontag is discussing nor those of the hero genre can concern themselves with genuine social or political criticism (even though the films are necessarily expressive of such criticism). Any serious questioning of the moral and political status quo—conditions that are responsible for the disasters and crises befalling people—would hamper the operation of fantasy and its production of temporarily satisfying "solutions" to whatever catastrophe is being depicted.

Sontag goes on to discuss various strategies with which science fiction handles such fears. For example, positing a bifurcation between good and evil and grossly oversimplifying the moral complexity of situations allow one to "give outlet to cruel or at least amoral feelings"[3] and to exercise feelings of superiority—moral and otherwise. Repressed ambiguous feelings toward science and technology seek quick fixes by means of fantasy and the imaginative construction of

[b] AU: The style of this journal requires that all British spellings be Americanized.

invulnerable heroes.

Much of what Sontag says can straightforwardly be applied to catastrophe in general and to the hero genre within science fiction. "Alongside the hopeful fantasy of moral simplification and international unity embodied in the science fiction films lurk the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence,"[4] Sontag writes:

> In the films it is by means of images and sounds . . . that one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself. Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects in art. In science fiction films disaster is rarely viewed intensively; it is always extensive. It is a matter of quality and ingenuity . . . the science fiction film . . . is concerned with the aesthetics of disaster . . . and it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction film lies.[5]

In science fiction films, disaster, though widespread, is viewed intensively. The disturbances constitutive of the disaster are moral and emotional as well as material. People are left without the mental or physical abilities they need to cope. Government is absent or useless. We find ourselves in what amounts to what Naomi Zack describes as a (Hobbesian) second state of nature—where government is inoperative and chaos (moral, social, political, personal) reigns.[6] Science fiction's way out is to imaginatively construct scenarios emotionally satisfying enough to temporarily assuage the distress (anomie or chaos) experienced in the film.[7]

**Heroes**

We live in an age of heroes. We are told "we need heroes," and so we invent them—we discover or rediscover them. People are classed as heroes who obviously are not (like the victims of 9/11 from one side and the perpetrators of 9/11 from the other). And sometimes, somehow, denying that one is a hero is likely to increase one's stature as a hero. What is a hero? Why are our need for heroes and our desire to become one as insatiable as it is pervasive? Does the appeal of the hero reside with an individual's infantile and narcissistic phantasies of omnipotence, a desire to become god-like or identify oneself with or even as a god? Does it reside in some regressive defensive strategy such as an attempt to return to (seemingly) less difficult and problematic times or at least times that were difficult in other ways? Is our inability to live without heroes, in seeking to be a hero, or in seeking out others who are heroes indicative of some societal and personal malaise—a need for "love" and power or a love of oneself perhaps?

Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" and Nietzsche's "Superman" both depict the heroic as involving a commitment to inner knowing—though just what is known is not altogether clear—along with a faith in one's own abilities. The ideas of being deeply, even hopelessly misunderstood; the ineffability and incommunicability of the truth of what one knows, along with the reasons for how one must act; and the almost unendurable burden one experiences in being a hero are also seen as essential. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche use the notion of "hero" to make moral claims with respect to how we should lead our lives and endure—even love—the lived human experience. Arguably, they saw themselves as heroes—as misunderstood, as keepers of some sacred truths, as travelling to the beat of different drummer, and ultimately bearing some terrible burden as a result of a "knowledge" to which others were simply blind. Psychology, and psychoanalysis in particular, gives an account as to why the appeal of the hero is inextricably tied to the human psyche. Jung explains the appeal of heroes in terms of

archetypes, and Freud speaks of narcissism and our orectic natures--nature driven by desire, appetite, and wish-fulfillment. Surely, these are states of mind that can drive the need to be or to identify with heroes? There is no diminishing of the modern appetite to consume and act out "reassuring" narratives regarding how we are all the hero of our own personal journey as evident in the many superhero narratives and even reality TV. Times of crisis and insecurity (our times) will always coincide with an age of heroes. Why is it that heroes are always there, indeed must be there, when we need them most? It is the need, of course, the need to take care of (to love) and to be taken care (to be loved) that ensures this. Scriptwriters are merely our ghost writers when it comes to tales of heroes and heroism.

In a promotional interview for Heroes,[8] a television show about ordinary people with extraordinary (god-like) powers, the show's creator/writer Tim Kring stresses that its motivating force is connected to the phantasy or wish (phantasy as psychoanalytically understood involves wish-fulfillment) that "everybody has of wanting to be somehow 'special.'" This narcissistic phantasy/desire of being one of the chosen, someone who is either herself a savior or close to someone who is, and who (often anonymously) hands out blessings and boons as well as fierce punishment is widespread, if not universal. It is a deeply satisfying wish-fulfilling phantasy particularly common among children (you have probably had it yourself), and, as our enduring appetite for reality TV demonstrates, many do not outgrow it. Throw in some sexy girls and guys, a few relatively harmless sexual and revenge phantasies—easily identifiable and easy to identify with—and you have the formula for a successful, manipulative, and arguably morally objectionable, made-for-television series or blockbuster hit. Kring knows his audience. Heroes, like many other superhero films, plays to and invokes prejudices, violence, a doomsday scenario, and a disregard for reality and truth. This powerful strategy can be used to exacerbate and then

exploit human insecurities and prejudices for entertainment, or more insidiously, for (arguably) unsavory political or social ends.

This is an age where criticism of mass media focuses largely on news (as entertainment), rather than on entertainment itself in the form of television series and pointlessly entertaining (if it is entertaining, is it necessarily pointless?) movies. But if Heroes is anything to go by, it might be time to revisit the allegedly harmless nature of commercial fluff—focusing not on the kinds of pseudo-moral criticism brought forward by the ultraconservative, but rather ironically on the banal but dangerous underlying "savior" themes and self-indulgent stereotypes sustained in shows like Heroes. Whatever its benefits may be and however innocuous much of it is, Adorno was right. There is a great deal to fear in the messages transmitted by mass art and mass cultural mediums:

> Although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious states of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage to the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object.[9]

## Spectators in Other Words Are Being Willingly, Even Happily, Used

Before discussing the phantasies that drive superhero films and television, some historical contextualization can help set the scene. In Part 1, we discuss aspects of the religious and philosophical motifs that are most prominent in and necessary to Heroes. In Part 2, we argue that the prejudices that underlie these motifs are divisive, that they are sources of discrimination, if

not violence, and that they often are extraordinarily satisfying. The seemingly innocuous escapism in Heroes mirrors functionally significant aspects of political rhetoric that positions "us" against "them." The phantasies and needs that such infantile themes give rise to encourage, support, and can help explain why those who have argued that mass art may be inherently dangerous are worth listening to, even if they overstate and overgeneralize their concerns. We conclude that avoidance of such dangers--and not all such phantasy is dangerous or even undesirable--involves a critical attitude to the ingestion of such entertainment on the part of the audience.

## 1. Religious and Philosophical Motifs in Heroes

### *Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith and Nietzsche's Superman as Heroes*

Kierkegaard examined the notion of a subjective and "passionately inwards" relationship with God that led a reluctant, heavily burdened, unassuming, and incognito Knight of Faith to rely on a special inner knowing to help him carve out a salvific role--his own and that of others--in the world. The Knight of Faith could be anyone, indeed, likely to be one of the least suspected:

> I candidly admit that in my practice I have not found any reliable example of the knight of faith, though I would not therefore deny that every second man may be such an example. . . . I have not found any such person, but I can well think of him. Here he is. Acquaintance made, I am introduced to him. The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backwards, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, "Good Lord, is this the man? Is it really he? Why, he looks like the tax-collector!" However, it is the man after all. . . . He is solid through and through[;] . . . he belongs

> entirely to the world, no Philistine more so. One can discover nothing of that aloof and superior nature whereby one recognizes the knight of the infinite.[10]

The development of this character is not easy. The tests, or "spiritual trials" that the Knight of Faith (for example, Abraham) will encounter will require an absolute, unwavering faith in a truth that can, by its very nature, never be shown to be objectively true on Kierkegaard's fideist account; a truth that can only be grasped subjectively and to which only the Knight of Faith has access. To begin with, the Knight of Faith must be an ethical agent, and so the tests or "spiritual trials" s/he will encounter may be the ethics of this world. Anyone hoping to be such a figure must overcome the pull of the aesthetic realm; earthly delights that are ends in themselves. And he must also "suspend" earthly law since any such ethics and law would condemn him, as evidenced when Abraham agrees to sacrifice his son Isaac--an unethical act on any earthly account. For the Knight of Faith, the ethical is not overridden but temporary and (divinely) suspended in the form of a "teleological suspension of the ethical." The "Truth" that the subjective individual "appropriates" is that God became man and that each human being has an aspect of the divine within her. This "Truth" (Kierkegaard uses a capital "T") can only be grasped subjectively because it contains a paradox—that God (the infinite) became human (finite) and yet somehow remains infinite.

The Tragic Hero abandons or compromises one set of ethics—something comprehensible and a "normal" or earthly understanding for some incommensurate yet allegedly greater other. For instance, Ra's al Ghul who claims Gotham must be destroyed because it is "beyond saving."[11] Unlike the Knight of Faith, the Tragic Hero--or, in this case, the superhero's nemesis--gives reasons that belong entirely to the earthly realm and are comprehensible by others in the

society of which he is a part, even if they are deemed unethical. The scary thing is that Kierkegaard notes that we cannot necessarily distinguish between the Knight of Faith and the madman. Consider, for example, the juxtaposition of Batman and the Joker. The Knight of Faith cannot justify his action in any ordinary ethical (earthly) sense to anyone since, in ethical terms, it is paradigmatically unjustifiable. The Knight of Faith cannot, in any significant way, be a member of this society. He must walk alone (and be lonely). This echoes the Nietzschean idea of Zarathustra, who, like Jesus, spends forty years in the wilderness. The spiritual trial here is undertaken in an effort to get to know oneself and not be influenced by external norms and ideals. Some of the superheroes screened are examples of Nietzsche's Superman or Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, yet others are Tragic Heroes, condemned and yet "blessed" to walk a path not merely different from but altogether outside the tried, the tested, and the ordinary.

Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith must feel or know the word of God or the Truth and willingly follow it, but this "infinite subjective risk" is encountered in "fear and trembling." Looking upon the actions of a Knight of Faith, others may conclude that she is an aesthete who, in following her own desires or uncontrollable urges, is acting immorally. The Knight of Faith cannot explain her actions to others; like Johannes de Silentio (the pseudonym under which Kierkegaard published Fear and Trembling), she is silent, she does not and cannot have the words or means to explain her actions. The act of faith is one of subjective knowing, a special relationship or communication between God and his chosen subject, the Knight of Faith.

The Tragic Hero, according to Kierkegaard, differs from the Knight of Faith in that s/he operates in the realm of the ethical, sacrificing one moral good for another greater good that can be explained, understood (and applauded) by others around him. The Knight of Faith, when

asked to explain his actions, remains silent. Unlike a Tragic Hero, the Knight of Faith is mute. Often standing alone and misunderstood, he has the God-like power to create or destroy. The subjective and, in many ways, ideological perspective from which he views the world has consequences for ethics, politics, and family. This struggle between the authentic self and the being-in-the-world is exemplified in the situations the heroes in superhero films must negotiate.

Nietzsche's Übermensch is another Hero: the Super- or Over-man who is upheld by Nietzsche as the pinnacle of human potentiality in terms of power and integrity in a broad sense of the word. As in the case of the Knight of Faith, the Übermensch goes "beyond good and evil." Existentialism claims we create, with great effort and personal expense, the self and our morals. It is up to us to seek and act authentically—to determine and act in accordance with our own truth or perspective. There is no guarantee that the perspective of others will coincide or be compatible with our own. In fact, there is much reason to believe it will not. Authenticity is the highest ideal of the individual in existentialism. While this may seem negative and nihilistic, collapsing into extreme relativism or subjectivism, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are moralists with definite views on what is wrong--in society and individual action. For example, they abhor any societal institutions that promote a herd mentality where the individual is not encouraged to discover his or her own authentic self and instead must follow the masses without question or reason, desire, or faith. In promoting individual freedom and a subjective truth accessible to the individual themselves, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard hold aloft this idea that one has the potentiality, power, and presence, here and now, to satisfy the desire to be or become special.

Characteristics and motivations of the Superman and the Knight of Faith include rejecting a "herd" mentality, not following rules and regulations simply because they are there, and not being a passive member of society. The active, critical thinker who is honest and authentic is

upheld as the moral master, the powerful individual who creates her own, life-affirming way and is influential in doing so. In following one's own path, the Superman demonstrates that this can be done. Yet the power-wielders in society who set the ethical tone for their citizens may persecute such anarchists, using them to serve as an example of what not to do. They cast the Knight of Faith as a crazy person, the Superman as an outcast.

In the film Spiderman, we see Peter Parker (Toby Maguire) fashioning himself into a Superhero and learning how to use and expand upon his powers.[12] While willing and creating oneself, one necessarily faces existential questions such as "What is the purpose of my life" and "To whom do I have a duty or any responsibility (apart from myself)?" For the Superheroes, the struggle to answer these questions is revealed when they explore to whom they should or should not use their powers to assist and at what cost. As Nietzsche writes in his Assorted Opinions and Maxims, "Will a self.--Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum 'know thyself,' but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self."[13] Ultimately, this existential doctrine seems to forget the sense of community and notions of belonging that are central to human identity, in particular how our family and early role models influence us and in many ways shape who we become. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, as existential agents, many Superheroes have been abandoned or orphaned. As isolated individuals, they fashion themselves as independent agents because this is what they are; and in some ways, this self-fashioning is their reaction to having being abandoned.

The characters in Heroes, along with iconic superheroes such as Spiderman and Batman, have striking similarities to the Knight of Faith and to the Übermensch, the Superman. They fight to overcome both themselves and others and use their will to power (special powers) to do so. This perspective is revealing, infantile, and narcissistic, and it is often coupled with themes of

revenge and violence rooted deep in adolescent phantasy. The heroes are the chosen. With one eye on Armageddon and both on the girl who needs saving, they will do anything to convince themselves they never asked for or desired to be so singled out for greatness. And there we are, right alongside them. We too want to be heroes—which is why there is such a plethora of shows—mostly juvenile, but satisfying (mostly) unconscious desires, needs and wishes—about them.

*The Redemptive Aspects of Heroes*

There is undoubtedly an upside to phantasy and religious longing, and these are made amply clear in Heroes. Employing a deliberate cartoon-like quality and trading on the appeal of action comic strips, Heroes intrigues and entertains while supposedly confronting some of the big philosophical questions. The voiceover at the start of season 1, Episode 1 asks, "Why are we here?" and "Do we have a soul?" It quickly moves to a soliloquy about the quest to solve life's mysteries and an acknowledgment, perhaps a platitude, that the human heart can find meaning only in the small moments. We are briefly left to ponder that peculiarly adolescent hope: can we "have it all?" These questions are juxtaposed with essential elements driving the Heroes's plot. Will the evolution of the species show us that ultimately other things are far more important—things like creating an identity or being powerful and using this power truthfully or "faithfully"? The consequences of this, Heroes suggests, are enormous (indeed biblical), proving that one person (provided he's a Knight of Faith or a Superman) can make a difference. This is a huge burden to bear, as the doctrine of eternal recurrence demonstrates. The significance of the consequences, for which one is wholly responsible, is articulated by Nietzsche in "The Greatest Weight," where the demon suggests one must relive every single moment of one's life, eternally.

Knowledge of this would fundamentally change the way one would lead one's life and the choices one makes.[14] If it is taken seriously and believed, one couldn't help but (try to) act authentically—or, alternatively, not to act at all.

The Superman creates strengths out of his weaknesses and thus styles his character: a "great and rare art!"[15] How each character's particular power(s) in Heroes will manifest is an interesting, if obvious, way of driving the plot. There is the struggle--though it is not altogether clear just what the nature of this struggle is--between the self and other, between how one sees oneself and how one is seen. The idea of radical responsibility accompanying freedom is present here, as each person is perfectly free to create herself as she chooses, yet she is responsible for her actions, her character, and--oh yes--for saving the world. This Nietzschean mode of self-fashioning allows one to create or destroy and style one's mode of existence. However, it brings with it the responsibility for a person's world: its reality and its appearance. Only the powerful and the authentic, God-like Heroes can exist in a way in which they are fully responsible for every action and its consequences. Here is the existential fight for and against what one is and what one can become. This struggle is displayed in Heroes through the characters' wretchedness and angst, particularly when they fail to save a victim or prevent someone's death. The struggle is accompanied by a narcissistic satisfaction palpable to viewers, indeed shared by viewers, as the heroes use their superpowers to refashion themselves into something that is bearable—and, of course, pleasing to the eye.

As Nietzsche proclaimed, with the death of humankind's idea of God, we can then turn ourselves into a god to be worshipped—projecting such qualities as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Indeed, the powers of some of the characters involve such abilities. Power is manifest as an ability to have a sustained impact on the world—or to even save it. Power is, thus,

upheld as the most important trait and linked to one's secret identity. The scientists, the geneticists, and doctors, as well as the military personnel, are powerful and god-like characters, as the scientific world is privileged, and the heroes are given the opportunity to help them--and, in so doing, to play God. As the powers traditionally associated with God are reappropriated by (Super)humans, the consequences are immense. These new Heroes are strong. They destroy what they must in order to survive, though ultimately their intention is allegedly to harmonize the world to make it happy and united (provided America is in charge). There is, of course, an element of fear associated with the idea of humans as God and with the political question of who should rightfully lead.

Heroes's episodes and most superhero films always invoke suspense and cliff-hanger endings. This is, largely, to allow for a sequel, prequel, or stand-alone reinterpretation of the story that will sell more tickets and advertising space including product placements. There is plot development but little or no pacing. Each episode or blockbuster film embodies and plays to adolescent impatience. The formula for a television series designed to get audience members hooked, the thriller has many psychoanalytic tools of which filmic devices make effective use. The thrill of the gaze, the view that the audience member is forced to take by the way the series is shot, operates to great effect in Heroes. The cinematographers often make use of the "blind spot" technique to ensure that the viewer cannot see all at once the entire area in which the action takes place. This adds to the fictional fear for the well-being of the characters, as well as an excited "what-lies-in-the-shadows" response. When we have some of our questions answered (that have been set up in the course of events and by staged direction), we feel relieved. This building-up of excitement and suspense that is slowly resolved bit by bit but never fully alleviated or completely satisfied speaks to our desire to be teased and tempted.

Such teasing and tempting are often expressed via the use of the cheerleader in Heroes or the damsel in distress (even if she is feisty and intelligent such as Rachel Dawes [Katie Holmes)]in Batman Begins). Speaking to our society's obsession with youth, beauty, short skirts, and stereotypical teenage sexuality, the cheerleader is symbolic of some of the main problems with this construction of the sexualized woman in Western society. Further, with the predominance of the Western world of mass-manufactured and -distributed consumerist goods, particularly mass media and Hollywood blockbusters, this limited and restrictive vision of modern sexually attractive femininity is sold to the entire world. The character is appealing to the widest possible audience not only because of how she looks but because she isn't portrayed as a helpless and unintelligent "bimbo." Thus, women are attracted to her, as well as men, and thus the stereotypical image of desire and woman (in this case, "girlhood") is bought and consumed readily by all audiences. Once more, as Adorno feared, the Western (specifically American) culture industry rules supreme, and the ethical message of maintaining the social, political, personal, and conservative ethical status quo authoritatively predominates.

## 2. The Phantasies to Which Superhero Narratives Cater and the Need for Critical Engagement

*Apocalyptic Post-9/11 United States and the Need for Control*

The Heroes series, and many other superhero films such as the X-Men vehicles, serves to reassure us that America is still in control of the world, even as it comes to an end. The city we see blown up, time and time again, is New York. In X-Men: Apocalypse, the mutants (aka the superheroes) come from all countries across the world to meet up and take control, to extinguish

the baddies and reassure citizens that everything will be okay.[16] Even if worst comes to worst and there is the apocalyptic destruction of the city or Earth as we know it, the ones to take charge will be based in the land of the free. The authority with which the American English language reigns is seen in the way the characters speak, dress, and act; they flourish in times of stress, when they can take charge and solve problems. And let us just pause for a moment and recall the costumes worn by Captain America[17] and Wonder Woman,[18] who are basically wrapped up in the American flag.

Given our current age in which public trust is diminishing[19] and anxiety surrounding alien others (terrorists and the like) is increasing,[20] surely such hero narratives are reassuring? Surely, it is important to retain this hope that we will be protected, saved, looked after, that our heroic members of society (leaders, the military and armed forces) will take care of us. These superhero films often carry the message that power in the right hands will be for the greater good and for the betterment of the global world--which would flourish if it only took on the ideals of Western, democratic, developed countries like America, which will happily serve as the role model for everyone else. However, these messages are neither as innocent nor harmless as they first appear. The stereotypes and prejudices that underlie the philosophical and religious motifs we discussed in the first section are divisive and encourage discrimination, if not violence. Many of these "lightweight" escapist films echo political rhetoric or imagery that positions "us" against "them." What entertains us and why need to be examined constantly and critically. Neither heroes nor science fiction is a substitute for the real thing—for addressing political, social, and personal malaise and the very real dangers—including annihilation--that we fear and must face.

*The Need for Critical Engagement with Mass Art*

Superhero films attract mass audiences worldwide and resonate with viewers of all ages. Whether such films encourage passive spectatorship--and whether this is a problem--or if they allow for critical reception of the messages depicted therein is a source of debate in philosophy of film.[21] The optimism of the power of film to think and encourage thinking is taken up by contemporary philosophers such as Thomas Wartenberg, who see film as a vehicle for screening philosophical thought experiments and offering new perspectives on issues that (may) have relevance to everyday life. Wartenberg claims that "film is able to give philosophical concepts and ideas a human garb that allows their consequences to be perceived more clearly."[22] If contemporary films depict diverse narratives instead of constructing a homogenous picture of social reality, then audiences are encouraged to think critically by imaginatively engaging with multiple perspectives, thereby alleviating philosophers such as Adorno of the fear of passivity.[23] However, art does, after all, reflect life, and in this way, films (and mass art and media more generally) depict some of the divisive and discriminatory stereotypes and prejudices that we witness every day.

Thus, as creative products are made by people situated in a time and place, art often depicts philosophical, religious, ethical, and social ideas that reflect (even when distorting or displacing) everyday concepts and concerns. Given that mass-produced and -distributed entertainment forms are widely accessible and infiltrate the everyday for most people in the developed world, they also provide us with the opportunity to critically examine these concepts and worries. In fact, by critiquing the artistic depiction of, for example, ethical dilemmas, we are able to engage imaginatively with an ethical conundrum in a way that is less threatening than if we were directly discussing an actual event. There are important educational implications of such a claim. Artworks, particularly narrative artworks, may offer a "safe" object of contemplation

that exists in the fictional world, allowing us to explore important questions about value, meaning-making, politics, and society. In this way, art reflects worldly concerns back to us, allowing us, in turn, to reflect on the issues therein depicted.

If it is true that we are able to more steadily contemplate an artwork than a situation unfolding in real life and if we are able to capture and express our concerns through art as a way of articulating, exploring, and relieving their burden on us, this makes a strong case for the need for aesthetic education. Martha Nussbaum defends the particular role some narrative artworks may play with respect to moral education, claiming that the moral agent is invited to use her sympathetic imagination as well as her intellect to understand the facts of a particular situation and "see" how to respond appropriately to characters and scenarios depicted in such artworks.[24] While Nussbaum is not extending her argument to all artworks or all films and while the engagement she is particularly focused on pertains to ethics, we can see that all kinds of messages may be embedded in the stories we tell and that it is worth engaging with these critically rather than passively.[25] To engage with the messages depicted in superhero films in a critical fashion, for instance, may also include reflecting on the political motives of those who depict caricaturized others as a dangerous threat to be excluded from liberal, democratic society. Rather than passively accepting political rhetoric that positions "us" against "them," becoming aware of such language and symbolism within art may then enable us to better recognize such morally loaded language when it is used by journalists or politicians, for instance. The need for mass art to be examined for both its moral and aesthetic possibilities is due, at least in part, to the predominance of mass art in society.

Film, as a technological art form, can be viewed and understood by many people virtually on first contact and can elicit powerful responses.[26] The nature of the audience's various

responses to mass art and media is still under debate but includes responding to the emotional quality of film, images, and realistic representations[27] that can depict various aspects of society, character, and politics. In this way, art is not merely harmless, light-weight “entertainment” objects; to the extent that it reflects the values and prejudices of society, critical spectatorship and active engagement with art and film is preferable over passive receivership of such art and mass art objects. Critical engagement with the ideas portrayed within films may be offered up for philosophical discussion, and films themselves may be critically discussed.[28] Such a critically engaged attitude may be supported by teachers in classrooms, parents at home, and even by certain artworks themselves, as they challenge the formulaic structure and stereotypical aspects that beleaguer mass art created with primarily an economic rather than aesthetic intention.

The good news is that the technology and medium of mass art and film are not inherently “bad” or necessarily evocative of passive spectatorship. What is required are critically engaged viewers and creators of film and other mass media products--including artworks and sources of entertainment. In our technologically saturated society, we must educate people to be critical, reasonable, and compassionate toward others.[29] Only in this way can we critically assess the many diverse messages that we face every day when we log on to social media, watch the broadcast news, or view a film or television program. It is only when we start to reconsider our assumptions and those tensions within the society of which we are a part that we will be able to challenge what needs changing and start to pursue--to create as well as demand different kinds of mass art--art and cultural products that portray ethical “global citizens.” The global citizen is someone who recognizes others as more similar rather than different to himself, even while taking seriously individual, social, cultural, and political differences between people. Global citizens (as defined and defended by Peter Singer,[30] Martha Nussbaum,[31] and Naomi Klein[32])

come together and unite in the recognition that we should all care about planet Earth and that all people have a shared interest in living well. Pragmatically, global citizens adopt a critical attitude to the policies and biases of their society. For our purposes, this critical attitude also reflects upon the mass art and entertainment one ingests and consciously selects the messages one chooses to propagate and affirm.

**Notes**

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[1]Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Dell, 1979), 209-25.
[2]Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," 223.
[3]Sontag, 215.
[4]Sontag, 220.
[5]Sontag, 212-13.
[6]Naomi Zack, Ethics for Disaster (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), and "Philosophy and Disaster," Homeland Security Affairs 2 (2006), https://www.hsaj.org/articles/176, accessed May 20, 2019.
[7]See Michael P. Levine and William Taylor, "The Upside of Down: Disaster and the Imagination 50 Years On," M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture 16, no. 1 (2013), http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/586, accessed May 20, 2019.
[8]Heroes, created by Tim Kring (2006-10; Universal City, CA: NBC Universal Television Studio).
[9]Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," New German Critique 6 (1975): 13.
[10]Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, trans. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943/1983), 49-50.
[11]Ken Watanabe in Batman Begins, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures); Liam Neeson in The Dark Knight Rises, directed by Christopher Nolan (2012; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures).
[12]Spiderman, directed by Sam Raimi (2002; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures).
[13]Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1879/1996).
[14]Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1882/1974).
[15]Nietzsche, The Gay Science.
[16]X-Men: Apocalypse, directed by Bryan Singer (2016; Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox).
[17]Captain America, directed by Rod Holcomb (1979; Universal City, CA: Universal Television);

Captain America, directed by Albert Pyun (1990; Los Angeles: 21st Century Film Corporation); and Captain America: The First Avenger, directed by Joe Johnston (2011; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures).

[18]Wonder Woman, directed by Patty Jenkins (2017; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures).

[19]See Dietlind Stolle and Laura Nishikawa, "Trusting Others--How Parents Shape the Gneralized Trust of Their Children," Comparative Sociology 10, no. 2 (2011): 281-314.

[20]Martha Craven Nussbaum, The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

[21]Laura D'Olimpio, Media and Moral Education: A Philosophy of Critical Engagement (London: Routledge, 2018).

[22]Thomas E. Wartenberg, Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2007), 5.

[23]Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum, 1990).

[24]Martha Craven Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66.

[25]Laura D'Olimpio and Andrew Peterson, "The Ethics of Narrative Art: Philosophy in Schools, Compassion and Learning from Stories," Journal of Philosophy in Schools 5, no. 1 (2018): 92-110, https://www.ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/jps/article/view/1487, accessed May 20, 2019.

[26]Noel Carroll, "The Power of Movies," in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein H. Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 486-87.

[27]Wartenberg, Thinking on Screen, 5.

[28]Michael P. Levine and Damian Cox, Thinking through Film: Doing Philosophy, Watching Movies (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[29]D'Olimpio, Media and Moral Education.

[30]Peter Singer, One World: The Ethics of Globalisation (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2002).

[31]Nussbaum, The New Religious Intolerance.

[32]Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), and No Logo (New York: Picador, 2010).

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