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Superhero Films: A Fascist National Complex or Exemplars of Moral Virtue?

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Abstract

This paper deals with the "why" regarding our collective desire for superhero narratives. My goal is to build on the many definitions of a superhero and find a framework that we as scholars can use to evaluate how superhero films present inspirational moral virtue and not zealous nationalism of any kind. In the process I want to address the problems with some of the scholarly work done on the connection to superheroes and heroism both historically and immediately after 9/11, particularly those who have argued that American superheroism is a fascist myth, and show how the recent evolution of the superhero genre in film gives us much to learn from. Therefore, superheroes do not create a fascist national complex but are instead popular because they create and revolve around inspirational virtue, such as those Mark White used to describe Captain America. All superheroes are inspirational because of these moral virtues: courage, humility, righteous indignation, sacrifice and responsibility, and perseverance. These virtues may be applied differently, but their role in defining superheroes transcends individual characters. Therefore, regardless of who we side with in *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman V. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, we do so because we see these virtues realized within the world of superheroes.

Keywords

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Over fifty superhero films have grossed more than one hundred million dollars each at the box office since the Man of Steel first graced the big screen in 1978's *Superman*. It is safe to say that the film genre has grown significantly since then, and the top ten superhero films after 9/11 have grossed over three hundred million dollars each.[1] After their inception in the late 1930s comics, superheroes have had peaks and valleys in their popularity. However, with the growth of the superhero cinematic universe since 2000 it is clear that audience desire to see these characters on the big screen has grown exponentially. Studios are not just slating sequels anymore. They are scheduling entire franchise runs and setting premiere dates several years in the future before production even begins. It is no secret that the superhero film is a booming business with an endless stream of fans. However, this begs a simple question with a complicated answer: why are people drawn to these films?

The most recent superhero film trend began with *X-Men* in 2000, which is still garnering sequels today, and *Spider-Man* in May of 2002, which drew two sequels.[2] The fast growth of the genre after this point may tell us that, after the 9/11 terror attacks, audiences were looking for larger than life heroes. This may be true for a lot of audience members, but not all superhero films connect to the War on Terror narrative equally. *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Iron Man* (2008) may be the easiest to read through this lens but that is not the whole of either film.[3] It is much more difficult to see *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) or *Ant-Man* (2015) as allegories for anti-terrorism. Just like the comics that came before, these films are more complicated than they appear on the surface. However, that has not stopped scholars and critics from expressing oversimplified criticisms.

For example, a few years ago I attended a conference panel on superheroes where another scholar told me he would not let his own son watch *The Dark Knight* because it was the most

fascist of the Batman films. Not wanting to argue, I carried on the conversation but left wondering if there was something to his concern. My mind went back to a 2013 *Salon* article titled, "Superheroes are a Bunch of Fascists." With a misguided view of fascism and a simplistic view of the superhero, the author argued that superhero films are deceptively fascist and only popular because they are exciting and look cool.[4] The implication here is that audiences must be useful idiots that unknowingly support a dictator disguised as a superhero.

I responded to the *Salon* piece in *The Atlantic*, my argument summed up in the sub-headline, "political attacks on the genre miss the simple fact that Batman and Superman fight against tyrants – and choose not to abuse their power."[5] My article was quoted in a 2016 column at *MSNBC* that discussed how superhero films are now adding to the conversation of what it means to be a hero.[6] This is a useful discussion that gets poisoned when critics rush to equate Batman with Hitler. Seeing fascism primarily through the lens of a single person is troubling, as Robert Paxton has pointed out in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, because it limits the view of a fascist to a single larger than life figure (i.e. Hitler, Mussolini). Paxton argues "the image of the all-powerful dictator personalizes fascism, and creates the false impression that we can understand it fully by scrutinizing the leader alone."[7] This oversimplification has become commonplace for critiquing contemporary political opponents, let alone superheroes.

As Paxton has argued, the word "fascism" is incredibly problematic today in a similar fashion as "liberal" (where in the U.S.A. it refers to the political left and in Europe it is used in the traditional sense tied to liberty and conservatism). Fascism rose up against traditional liberals in the twentieth century by fighting the idea of liberty (or liberation) with a corrupt sense of moral purpose that saw purging undesirables as an altruistic act. Paxton defines fascism in the following way:

> Fascism may be defined as a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.[8]

The first part of this definition can be easily applicable to many political movements, which is how many critics wrongly use the term to easily attach it to any idea or trend of which they do not approve. The tipping point for heroic actions to become fascist has everything to do with the second part of Paxton's definition regarding the abandonment of ethical or legal restraints as justification for internal cleansing towards a utopic goal. This type of action is often found coming from the supervillain, not the superhero.

For some, arguing that superheroes are not fascist may appear to be akin to taking down a rhetorical straw man. However, as this essay will show, the argument has continued to resurface in mainstream discussions and interviews for many decades. Most recently in a 2016 interview with *The Wrap*, action film director John McTiernan called superheroes fascist because their actions were not those of humans.[9] This unsubstantiated argument went unchallenged and shows that the debate/misconception about a supposed connection between superheroes and fascism is still present, which makes it necessary to formally address this situation. Before going further, however, it is first important to consider how we define the superhero.

Superheroes May Be Super, but They Are Not Simple

Famed comics writer Stan Lee defines the superhero as "a person who does heroic deeds and has the ability to do them in a way that a normal person couldn't."[10] Simple and direct, Lee notes both heroism and abnormality. However, later in the essay Lee states, "I try to make the characters seem

believable and realistic as possible. In order to do that I place them in the real world, or, if the story is set in an imaginary world, I have to try to make that imaginary world as realistic-seeming as possible."[11] Therefore, while the heroic element of the superhero universe for Lee (arguably the most influential superhero author of all time) may not be fully realistic, it must be believable. This is why Lee calls superhero stories "fairy tales for grown-ups."[12]

Lee's definition explains both the benefits and the problems of superheroes. First, these characters accomplish good deeds that are important enough to qualify them as heroes. Second, these heroes achieve their goals on a scale so large that they are acting on a level above normal humans. This adds the all-important "super" prefix. However, the simplicity of many superhero narratives can easily reduce them to seeming childish in the eyes of some critics. Even Lee notes the similarity of superhero stories to fairy tales. However, just because a story is simple this does not necessarily disqualify it as unimportant. Like many religious texts, superhero narratives vary in depth and applicability. Fans regularly debate the motivations and qualities of superheroes just like faith communities debate the stories in their Holy Books.

Where does the superhero fall within this framework? Author Jeph Loeb and scholar Tom Morris seek to define the superhero in an essay titled "Heroes and Superheroes." The authors utilize the dictionary definition to cite the hero as someone possessing "super-human qualities favored by the gods," who can be seen as an "illustrious warrior," and one who is "admired for achievements and noble qualities."[13] Based on these definitions, Loeb and Morris argue, "The concept of a hero is a moral category."[14] This helps us contextualize why audiences are drawn to superheroes, particularly during the current cycle of post-9/11 superhero films. Superheroes are admirable because they embody relatable qualities found in societies similar to those depicted in the films (usually the United States or other first world countries).

How can a film about someone with fantastical superpowers be grounded in reality? In the widely-cited *After Virtue*, Alisdair MacIntyre argues that "every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least seen in the real world."[15] In addition, MacIntyre asserts that heroes emerge from societies in which courage and morality is part of a deeply imbedded tradition. Therefore, heroes (and superheroes) emerge as part of a moral desire based in reality. These films take place primarily in our world, not a foreign one, which makes the narratives much more applicable.

During the 2016 Comic-Con convention I sat on a panel about teaching Batman with Michael Uslan, the famed producer of every Batman film since 1989, who said he was originally drawn to Batman because of how the character's actions (and dilemmas regarding their implications) can teach lessons about morality.[16] The same can be said about other superheroes that make difficult decisions during tough situations. These stories are inspirational as they motivate us to consider lessons from a fictional universe in the real world. As this essay will detail, superheroes are inspiring because of their moral convictions and virtuous actions. Before we explore the inspirational virtue of superheroes we must first look at the history of those critical to the genre by answering the question – where did this passionately anti-superhero argument come from?

A Brief History of Criticism towards the Superhero and Popular Culture

For as long as superheroes have been popular there have been critics hoping to write them off as trivial, childish, or even destructive. With the rise of characters like Superman and Batman to levels of popularity previously unseen by any aspect of popular culture, it was only a matter of time before criticism arose. Scholars and historians have traced the anti-comic sentiment back to a 1940 article in the *Chicago Daily News* titled "A National Disgrace." The article describes comics as a "poisonous mushroom growth" and was circulated in 25 million reprints.[17] The growing concern over the content in comic books began to echo the similar animosity towards movies that grew out of the Payne Fund studies that led to more aggressive censorship strictures through the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934.

By 1945 criticism of superheroes continued to grow when scholar Walter Ong told *Time* magazine that Superman was a Nazi and Wonder Woman represented a Hitleresque pagan.[18] In addition, Ong compared superheroes to the totalitarian and "super state ideologies" of Hitler and Mussolini in an issue of *Arizona Quarterly* of the same year.[19] When Ong first posed questions about Superman, he was comparing the character to Nietzsche's Ubermensch (the super-man that can do no wrong), which was a major influence on Adolf Hitler.[20] Ong draws parallels to the origins of fascism and the fanfare of Superman as a "Champion of Democracy." While Superman is certainly loyal to the United States, he never stays to rule over all and create the "super state ideology" that Ong fears. Ong refers to these comics as "intellectual anesthesia" and "soporific" but fails to realize that Superman never makes the leap towards controlling his fans/followers.[21]

Similar sentiments rippled through other publications and helped usher in the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) in 1948 to police the content published in comics. The ACMP worked in a similar capacity to the PCA where every new publication would require a seal

of approval from the industry's watchdogs before distribution.[22] The 1948 Comics Code was relatively simple, taking verbiage from the PCA Code such as "crime should not be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy against law and justice or to inspire others with the desire for imitation."[23] Other strictures included rules against overt sexuality, torture, vulgarity, and any humorous view of divorce or parody of religion.

The comic industry's strongest antagonist (or supervillain) would appear in 1954 in the form of Dr. Frederic Wertham who published a study on the impact of comics on youth that was provocatively titled *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham argued that mediated violence as seen in comic books is increasingly harmful to the proper development of youth. Wertham's expertise was based on his experiences running a psychiatric clinic in Harlem from 1946-1958. Building on the concerns of the 1948 Comics Code, Wertham argued that children often imitate what they see in comics just like they do with films.[24] The problem, of course, is that Wertham had primarily been dealing with delinquents and simply pinned comics to the demographic to which he was most familiar. Many of his subjects struggled with illiteracy, which made comics and movies the easy target during a time when the medium was not highly respected.

By the end of 1954, the Comics Code was greatly amended to include lengthy descriptions of general standards as well as sub sections dedicated to dialogue, religion, costume, marriage, sex, and advertising.[25] There was enough support to justify the additional regulations, but some critics, such as Robert Warshow, were lukewarm on Wertham. While his focus was mostly on horror comics, Warshow sympathized with Wertham's concern but did not feel his own child was deeply impacted by comics. Warshow noted Wertham's questionably leading book title and study that oversimplifies the impact of popular culture in general. Wertham's deepest problem, according to Warshow, is that blaming comics for the actions of kids is "simple-minded."[26]

In 1959 a group of scholars held a conference at the Tamiment Institute to discuss the impacts of mass media. Scholars included Edward Shils and Leo Rosten. Shils explored cultures in terms of a cultural hierarchy based on "quality measured by aesthetic, intellectual, and moral standards."[27] Moving from high to low, Shils' levels were called superior/refined, mediocre, and brutal. The more originality and seriousness given to the subject the closer it is to superior culture, according to Shils. Rosten also noted problems with mass culture but is careful to draw a line between intellectuals and the masses. [28] While Shils emphasizes the gap between high and low culture as being helpful in choosing better popular culture, Rosten saw such preference for high culture as a limitation.

Criticism of Modern Comics and Superheroes

In the subsequent years public intellectuals continued to write off specific types of popular culture and saw it more as dangerous than illuminating. The most famous of that group is Neil Postman, whose 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (a title that Wertham no doubt would have liked) warned of the dangers involving an over-mediated populace. It is easy to see how such a concern echoes that of Wertham and others who saw the negative impacts of comics and superheroes on the masses. By the mid-1980s the superhero took a darker turn with writers like Frank Miller (*The Dark Knight Returns*) and Alan Moore (*Watchmen*) that led a new generation of authors to usher in more serious superhero stories that influenced a series of films beginning with Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman*. However, while these more adult-oriented stories were met with much fanfare, they did not avoid controversy.

On a 1989 episode of *Larry King Live*, prominent anti-comic crusader Thomas Radecki[29] argued that people should not buy violent superhero comics because they "teach people to hate

their enemy [and] kill their enemy as a way to solve problems."[30] This opinion is countered by Denis Kitchen, an independent comic artist and founder of Kitchen Sink Press,[31] who argued that comics were becoming more adult oriented and was not geared towards kids (therefore, we should not worry about them). Radecki was concerned because all of the top-selling comics were the most violent ones. Kitchen contended that the superhero stories were reflecting real-world violence and concern.[32] Radecki argued that adult comics are generally sadistic and pornographic, in addition to noting his support for Frederic Wertham's crusade against comics in the 1950s. Since the back-and-forth between Radecki and Kitchen, the deliberations about superheroes that continue in the 21st Century have changed focus from the use of violence to the intention of the hero.

Michael Uslan responded to this long history of criticism towards the superhero during an interview I conducted on September 27th, 2016. As previously noted, Uslan is the producer of numerous films including *Batman* (1989), *Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker* (2000), *The Spirit* (2008), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Lego Movie* (2014), and *Batman v Superman* (2016), among many others. Regarding the assertions made by Ong, Wertham, and other critics, Uslan points out that the original superheroes between 1938 and 1945 were not fighting supervillains and were, in fact, fighting the real-world fascists.[33] "Often, Hitler, Tojo, Hirohito, and Mussolini wound up on the [comic book] covers while all-American superheroes slugged or otherwise harangued them," Uslan declared.[34] Therefore, the origin and exponential growth of superheroes in popular culture during World War II was firmly grounded in a battle against fascism. In short, Uslan argues, "The contrary notion that they, themselves, were fascists doesn't hold water."[35] The superheroes of the 1940s went on to battle communism and any other villain to the free world. Criticism of the superhero has continued into the new millennium as the standard accusations of fascism have continued to resonate with some critics.

Problematic Criticism of the Superhero in the Post 9/11 Era

The debate over superheroes and popular culture continued into the early 2000s when John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett wrote two books about heroism: *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) and *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (2003). Interestingly, both refer to superheroes in the titles but rarely mention them in the texts. Similar to Wertham, Lawrence and Jewett describe the superhero and the nature of heroism in America as problematic and ultimately overly simplistic. In their criticism of superheroes, Lawrence and Jewett make minimal reference to actual superhero narratives to make their points. In addition, there is no solid definition of the superhero and the authors appear to use 'hero' and 'superhero' interchangeably. With the surge of superhero films since the publication of these two books, the views represented do not hold up well.

Lawrence and Jewett find superheroes undemocratic because they work alone and impose their will onto others. The authors argue that superheroes have an imperialist motivation in their United States origins that translate to 'America knows best.' This critique is better applied to the actions films of the 1980s, which regularly feature a single hero that takes charge regardless of laws, morals, or collateral damage – all of which are central concerns in *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. With the exception of *Batman* (1966) and *Batman & Robin* (1997), superhero films were largely focused on a single hero until *X-Men* (2000) and *The Avengers* began their cycles (2012); but since then, they have clearly evolved beyond the simplistic lone wolf approach. Even the early superhero comics of the Second World War, however, showed Captain America, Superman, or Wonder Woman responding to the war by aiding the allies instead of working individually without consultants.

Unlike true monarchs, Superheroes are usually called upon to act by others. The Avengers work with S.H.I.E.L.D., Batman works with Commissioner Gordon and the Gotham City Police Department (literally called to action by the Bat signal), Captain America works with the U.S. government but isn't afraid to stand against it, and Superman has taken orders and criticism from the government as well as from other superheroes. Superman along with Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Aquaman, Flash, and others are part of the Justice League of America and will be featured in an upcoming film.[36] Even in the critically acclaimed *Watchmen* graphic novel and 2008 film, superheroes worked with the government for decades and only became a problem after they were outlawed, forcing those eager to help into vigilantism. Only after being banned from service in *Watchmen* did Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan develop fascist tendencies and arguably became villains. As opposed to *Deadpool* (2016), who makes authoritative decisions played for humor, Ozymandias and Dr. Manhattan become total authoritarians on a global scale. The rest of the heroes in *Watchmen* continued to oppose the direction of the United States by working as vigilantes, but this is not necessarily the norm for superhero narratives. Most of these films feature heroes fighting against truly fascist villains, such as En Sabah Nur in *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016) whose goal was to cleanse the Earth of mutants so he could reset the planet's population and build towards his own ideal.

While superhero narratives may feature a single hero or small group these characters are also working with, consulting, or ordered by other organizations. When superheroes make mistakes (they are not perfect, after all), they report to authorities, governments, colleagues, families, etc., making this type of heroism quite democratic. Both responsibility and mindfulness have been integral parts of superheroes in comics for decades and have become central to the post-

9/11 superhero film cycle, which follows the lead of the last few decades of source material in comic books.

In *Myth of the American Superhero* Lawrence and Jewett set up the origin of the American monomyth in terms of beginning and ending in an Eden-like setting, such as a small Midwestern town, that is disrupted by an Evil Other.[37] One problem with applying the traditional monomyth to the superhero genre is that often superheroes are in a large metropolitan area and not a small Midwestern town (as evidenced by decades of past comics and the most recent decade of superhero films). The main problem here is that the authors equate superheroes with the American monomyth by lumping them in with any larger-than-life popular culture hero. While there are certainly similarities between the world of the superhero and the traditional hero, such as the disruption of order by evil thus calling to adventure a hero in a Campbell-esque fashion, the superhero is much more complicated than the authors suggest. Most superheroes do not live as superheroes consistently. Superheroes often have alter egos which they use to live their everyday lives. In this sense, no superhero can be fascist or authoritarian when they return to a live a common lifestyle, *in cognito*. In order to be truly fascist one must stay in the role of power and retain it, but superheroes only act when called.

Lawrence and Jewett argue that superheroes are popular because of a focus on American religious redemption.[38] In addition, the authors posit that the "monomythic superhero is distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers."[39] While there are applications of these characteristics individually on individual superhero narratives, one cannot simply brush over the entire genre so quickly. For example, superhero origins are rarely disguised in full and recent superhero films have made a point to include clear, in-depth origin stories. While most superheroes have extraordinary powers, this is

not a quality shared by all (Batman, Batgirl, Captain America, Iron Man, Black Widow, Hawkeye, and Ant Man do not have superpowers). The origin stories of some superheroes, such as Batman or Spider-Man, may suggest they are in search of personal redemption. However, this is not a traditional religious redemption. Batman and Spider-Man fight to keep the horrors witnessed in their own childhoods away from others. This is more of a self-sacrifice than a religious redemption.

In *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*, once again, Lawrence and Jewett refer minimally to actual superheroes and instead use the idea of the superhero to present what they see as a fascist national complex.[40] In the single chapter directed at actual superheroes, the authors reference no specific stories and two Captain America comic covers to diagnose "American superheroism as a threat to Democracy."[41] Without any reference to the actions of Captain America throughout his long history, Lawrence and Jewett see the idea of the patriotic character as evidence of a complex with fascist foundations connected to a religious desire for redemption, something they refer to as "pop fascism."[42] The term "zealous nationalism" in the book's subtitle is evidence of the authors' agenda, which is to discredit heroism as a descriptive myth and to portray superhero nationalism as fanatical.

The book includes an entire chapter dedicated to stereotypes of good and evil without realizing that the superhero (or zealous nationalist) presented by Lawrence and Jewett is that of a superhero stereotype originated by Ong and Wertham to make the same oversimplified arguments about fascism. In fact, Lawrence and Jewett do not clearly define how they are using fascism here. Throughout the history of superheroes in comics, television, and most recently film, these characters have battled enemies of all kinds. Lawrence and Jewett's views on superheroes represent a misguided perspective that prevails to this day as evidenced by John McTiernan's 2016 interview.[43]

Lawrence and Jewett conclude their book by arguing, "it is not our adversaries alone who must change; it is ourselves."[44] They continue by suggesting a need "for a creative rechanneling of Captain America's impulse to 'fight for right' toward a religious commitment that is shaped by both self-critical questioning and a sense of hope about the possibilities of peace."[45] The problem here is that the Captain America (and almost all superheroes by proxy) criticized by the authors actually has a long history of self-critical questioning. This is where it becomes important to understand the true depth and potential of superhero narratives as a whole. Ultimately, Lawrence and Jewett utilize the same problematic and flimsy definition of fascism that many previous critics have. If superheroes were fascist, they would stay out in the open and rule over everyone they saved from evil. If this were the case, the hero would ultimately become the villain – a point made in *The Dark Knight* (2008) with the line "either you leave a hero or you stick around long enough to become the villain." This is true for all superheroes; when the job is done they go back to their regular lives because it is not their duty to stay and dictate others.

In a more recent essay in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, Lawrence and Jewett note the religious connections to superheroes that some audiences find inspiring. However, like Wertham, the authors avoid numerous examples that would complicate their case.[46] By relying primarily on the first Superman films from 1978 and 1980, while completely overlooking that massive influx of current superhero films by the time their chapter was published in 2009, the authors argue that "the superhero of the American monomyth does not free us from violence, but perpetuates it even as he claims to be a force for peace in his own use of rationalized violence."[47] There are numerous counter examples to this view, but here are two brief instances. First, *Batman* (1989) only steps up when the law enforcement of Gotham City calls him as evidenced by the bat-signal. Therefore, Batman is not propagating violence but restoring a balance when the law cannot

handle a given situation – in this case it was The Joker. Second, and more recent, *Iron Man* (2009) features Tony Stark working hard throughout the entire film to make sure that he does not perpetuate violence after learning his own munitions were used against Americans.

Seeing the Superhero in a Moral Context

The purpose and popularity of superhero films, particularly those made after 9/11, does not support Lawrence and Jewett's thesis. While these films can be read through a political lens, Superheroes are generally above politics, which is why they are inspirational and relatable for people of many viewpoints (e.g., both liberals and conservatives find reasons to like Batman). When a question of governmental allegiance is raised, there is often a major conflict. For example, 2016 saw the release of such battles in the Marvel and DC universes with *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. In both films, there are major conflicts between superheroes where no side is completely correct. The former debates the ethics surrounding formal registration of superpowers so that no power goes unchecked while the latter shows backlash over Superman's god-like ability and Batman's penchant for becoming judge, jury, and executioner. In both films as well as their source material, characters show frustration when a superhero becomes too aligned with the U.S. government.

The heart of both films (and the comics they draw from) is less about finding a correct answer and more centered on the questions raised. When acting alone, the central question may be, who do they act for? Whose will are they imposing? What information are they basing their decisions on? Informed and balanced decisions are respected in the superhero world just like they are in our own. Each superhero has another identity that they inhabit most of the time that connects them to the everyday person in some way. This is a major deviation from the supervillain who

usually serves as a single identity seeking ultimate control with no concern for repercussions. Superheroes are imperfect, they make mistakes and take wrong turns, but we always know they have the right intentions because if they did not they would quickly become the supervillain. Superhero narratives prevail over time because we relate to them on such fundamental levels as we see bits of ourselves in each character.

Fans and critics may also read into superheroes by projecting their personal politics into the story. Those who argue against superheroes on a basis of domestic American politics largely miss the bigger purpose of the character. If the only goal of a superhero were to back a specific issue, political party, or worldview, the characters would not have prevailed as long as they have. There is something greater going on, something that transcends politics, and it has everything to do with virtue and morality. We can agree that fascist dictators are immoral but some critics continue to see superheroes as fascist. To clear this up, superheroes are not fascist because they act with a moral clarity that does not stand for any form of complete authoritarian power. At the very least, when morals are potentially compromised, the superhero struggles with this dilemma. If superheroes had fascist intentions there would be no internal moral struggle because any ends would justify their means.

Arguably one of the most important lines in the superhero mythos comes from the Spider-Man comics and films that state, "with great power comes great responsibility." C. Stephen Layman points out that this question can also be rephrased to ask "why be moral?"[48] Therefore, superheroes have power and responsibility and with that responsibility comes an important decision regarding how to use that power. This is where morality plays a key role. Using the power for selfish reasons would be immoral, however, using the power selflessly to help others would largely be accepted as a moral act. Using *Spider-Man 2* (2004) as an example, Layman notes that

Peter Parker is "obligated to remain our friendly neighborhood superhero. Doing so may cause him great personal pain, but this pain is outweighed by the overall good that his super-heroic activities bring to the world."[49] Just about every superhero suffers a great personal sacrifice in order to help the greater good. These characters have trouble pursuing personal happiness in their regular lives, because the larger duty of their super-heroism appeals to a great sense of moral purpose.

For example, in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Ultron feels he must destroy humanity in order to save Earth. A similar plan was hatched in *Watchmen* (2008) when Ozymandias, a superhero turned villain, decides to drop a nuclear bomb on the planet as a means to kill a few to save many. In *X-Men: Apocalypse* the villain wants to literally purge humanity as a means to reboot the planet in his own vision. In each film, the real superheroes stand against such villainy that resembles fascist autocracy (a single being with absolute power). These villains are not called to action but instead decide to impose their will on others. When a good character fears he or she cannot control their power, such as Bruce Banner in the latest *Avengers* films, said hero considers isolation as a means to keep innocent people safe. These decisions show us that in order to be a superhero one must possess some kind of moral compass that allows them to act only in support of a free society that does not stand for autocrats.

Superheroes and Morality

Can superheroes be both fascist and moral? Referring back to Paxton's definition, fascists have a corrupt morality and ethical code that diminishes freedom and promotes autocracy. Fascists may think they are doing the right thing by having a select few hold the most power, however, superheroes understand that a society functions best when the citizens are unshackled by dictators

and other villains. In addition, fascists may believe they are doing the right thing but are living with a very different moral "code" than the superheroes are. Superheroes and fascists both believe they are being altruistic, however, the end result is very different as one saves lives while the other destroys them in hopes of an unattainable utopian future. Superheroes have legal and ethical boundaries that differ from fascists as evidenced by the fact that superheroes do not strive to become rulers of the societies they protect.

If superheroes are moral creatures, how do they develop standards of morality? The answer is usually found in the character's origin story. Where they come from and what they have experienced will often dictate how a given superhero envisions their place in the world. Some heroes come from places of perfection such as Wonder Woman, who is a demigoddess and warrior princess. Another example can be found in Thor who is the Norse God of Thunder and Superman who carries powers from another world known as Krypton. These characters exhibit some form of perfection and ultimate strength from their inception, however, most overcome a struggle of some kind in order to become their superhero self. Bruce Wayne loses his parents before becoming Batman and the same can be said for Peter Parker/Spider-Man as well as Superman. Other characters such as Wolverine, Daredevil, Deadpool, Hulk, and Captain America received superpowers by toxic accident or scientific experimentation.

Regardless of how a character gained superpowers (or created a super technology like Tony Stark/Iron Man), they are all faced with the same question: "what do I do with it?" This is where a very important decision is made that puts a character on the path to superheroism instead of villainy. The choice to use a superpower for good and not evil, as well as a consciousness to use it sparingly, is a moral and virtuous choice. Regarding moral virtue, Aristotle noted that "virtues come neither by nature nor against nature, but nature gives the capacity for acquiring them, and

this is developed by training."[50] Therefore, environment plays a key role in defining one's moral character. The test of a specific action, according to Aristotle, is connected to the type of pain or pleasure that is resulted from the action.[51] A selfish act will often result in a supervillain, whereas a selfless one reflects a superhero.

The next question a superhero must answer is, why should one be moral? C. Stephen Layman has answered this question by using *Spider-Man 2* as an example. The reasons for being moral in that film can be seen in most other superhero films, though the first two are the most applicable to superheroes generally. Reason one: "if you fail to do your moral duty, there will be negative consequences that affect you, directly or indirectly."[52] This reason is quite vague because it still gives room for selfish action. This is why reason two, "because it is right," clarifies morality based on motivation to protect the standards and lifestyle of a free society.[53] Morally speaking, action based on selfish reasons is not moral at all. Therefore, a superhero makes this decision because it is the right thing to do regardless of the potential personal impact on the hero.

Moral Choices

A decision based on morality is not always an easy one. Often the decision to do the right thing comes with battling the fear that may come with it. Superheroes often go up against villains who certainly have the ability to defeat them. In order for a superhero to answer their call to action, they must possess courage, which Aristotle referred to as "moderation in the feelings of fear and confidence."[54] Courage comes in many forms, which includes opposing dangerous enemies but also opposing one another when applicable.

In looking at the specific divide between Captain American and Iron Man in the comics, Eric. D. Wesselmann and J. Scott Jordan assert that a moral choice can be based on "five basic

themes that form the basis of most moral systems found cross-culturally: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity."[55] These same moral themes can be seen across the DC and Marvel cinematic universes. In the first *Iron Man* (2008), Tony Stark restructures the purpose of Stark Industries because he learns that his company's weapons are being used to kill Americans (harm/care). *X-Men* deals with the acceptance of mutant-kind (fairness/reciprocity). Morality based on in-group/loyalty can be seen in any of the films focusing on larger groups of superheroes such as *The Avengers* films and especially *Captain America: Civil War*. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) deals with a program focused on corrupting American soldiers into becoming Hydra assassins (purity/sanctity). *The Dark Knight* grapples with The Joker who has no respect for established laws or the authority that enforce them (authority/respect).

Considering *The Dark Knight*, the film deals directly with a superhero amidst a series of deeply moral decisions. When the film was released, critics and pundits of all political stripes claimed the film as a visualization of their own ideology. During our interview, Uslan noted this common debate:

> "I LOVED how political pundits and socio-political commentators from the right wing and the left all claimed "The Dark Knight" as their own. To the right, he was the ultimate law and order soldier representing the best of a virtual police state. To the left, he was an independent hero to the people a la Robin Hood, disregarding government bureaucracy and red tape to save the masses from the powerful and corrupt and evil in society who preyed on them."[56]

However, Uslan points out that the end of *The Dark Knight* complicates any reading of the film as being purely left or right politically. When Lucious Fox (Morgan Freeman) creates a NSA-style technology for monitoring anything and everything, he makes clear that it is not a project he is proud of. Uslan notes that "As Batman's moral conscience, Freeman [Fox] calls him out on it and poses the question … if the 'hero' stoops to the level of the 'villain,' then does he not, himself,

become a villain?"[57] This is why Fox poses this as a moral dilemma – the technology is needed to stop the Joker, however, if Batman continues to use this technology he may be going too far.[58]

It is the moral decisions, such as those noted above, that makes superheroes interesting and inspirational to many fans. In an essay titled "Superheroes as Moral Pornography," David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister argue that superhero comics "satisfy a basic human motivation: the motivation to divide the world into good people and bad, and to morally praise and condemn them accordingly."[59] It is important here to note that dividing sides into good versus evil can be exploited by any group to convince others that one side is better than the other. This may be why it is easy for Lawrence and Jewett to write off all superheroes as fascist. However, it must be noted that when a difficult situation arises for a superhero or group of superheroes, their actions are deemed good or bad based on shared cultural morals.

Shared Moral Standards

Therefore, superheroes (even those who act alone) are generally governed by a shared set of principles that is accepted by much of the free world. We can look at this as the superhero equivalent of academic peer review – superheroes are acting within a given set of strictures on which they are allowed to act. Of course, a superhero may act alone and outside of their guidelines but the infrequent acts of authoritarianism are greatly outnumbered by those that are approved by organizations like S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Gotham Police Department. Opposite the superhero, supervillains are generally motivated by selfish, anarchistic beliefs that must be countered. If this takes an authoritative act, then so be it, but as Robin S. Rosenberg pointed out, superheroes are familiar and comforting because their stories wrestle with moral as well as physical issues.[60]

Of course, siding with a superhero can get tricky when they stand against each other. Like their comic source material, *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* each depict heroes facing off against one another to stand for something they believe in. It is difficult to pick a side in these films, because "being moral is about the daily work of negotiating and managing our relationships with others."[61] Usually superheroes can work with each other through cooperation and compromise; however, it is realistic that these characters (much like the rest of us) are sometimes faced with situations that divide them. Superheroes can be divisive because their decisions are not always simply good or bad but rather a choice between bad or worse. This is why the superhero's decision-making process is also an essential part of determining how the hero differs from the villain.

Superheroes and Moral Virtue

Audiences are drawn to superheroes not only because good triumphs over evil (though that is part of it), but also because of *how* the hero triumphs. A large part of this is because of the virtuous moral decisions made by the hero on the screen. The moral choices in superhero films are most often of the post-conventional type. This means that moral decisions are based on either an accepted law or on the principles of the individual character.[62] The divide between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers in *Captain America: Civil War* is based on this kind of moral choice. Tony wants to give over control of superheroes to an international organization that will create an accepted law for all superheroes to follow. Conversely, Steve wants superheroes to remain independent of all government organizations so they are free to follow their individual principles that helped them become The Avengers. These principles are guided by S.H.I.E.L.D. and when the U.S. Government gets in the way those principles are compromised, according to Captain America.

Therefore, acting outside of the U.S. Government does not make Steve Rogers a fascist. In fact, it is this type of opposition to massive government control that helped Steve Rogers battle the Nazis in the Second World War.

Similarly, in *The Dark Knight*, Batman has to decide between outing the crimes of Harvey Dent to the public or becoming the fall guy and allowing Dent to become a hero in death so that Gotham City and its governing bodies do not become unhinged. If Batman were a true fascist he would never sacrifice the power of his persona to help a city in crisis. But criticism towards Batman as a fascist has continued with responses to *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. An April 2016 piece in *The Guardian* argues that director Zack Snyder has simply learned how to package and sell fascism just like Frank Miller did with *The Dark Knight Returns* graphic novel.[63] The author takes a simplistic approach that allows for a single story to negatively brand a character. Both *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* feature a Bruce Wayne that comes out of retirement to help Gotham battle its demons. Authoritative actions are taken out of desperation, but by the end of both stories Wayne has returned to his ordinary life.[64]

In *The Virtues of Captain America: Modern-Day Lessons on Character from a World War II Superhero*, Mark D. White argues that Captain America is the "moral center of the superhero community." Steve Rogers is a good basis of comparison as arguably the purest superhero. In fact, one can see evidence of the strength of his purity when he begins to pick up Thor's seemingly unmovable hammer in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), but puts it down so as not to embarrass the Norse God.[65] White argues that Captain America's "moral code is exactly what we need to restore civility and respect in the twenty-first century in both our personal lives and our political debates."[66] My goal here is to add to the character's inspirational value and further argue how all superheroes are exemplars of moral virtue, not just Captain America.

White notes five basic virtues that work as moral inspiration that we can apply to the entire superhero mythos. These virtues are courage, humility, righteous indignation, sacrifice/responsibility, and perseverance. These traits are seen as virtuous based on an accepted, generic moral backbone. White writes, "These are character traits we immediately associate with Captain America and other heroes – as well as people we know in real life whom we think of as virtuous."[67] We not only associate these characteristics with superheroes but also people we look up to, which indicate that these characters are inspirational. Superheroes show strong morals that lead to virtuous actions that inspire us to be better people.

Courage is an essential part of being a superhero. There is nothing to look up to and appreciate without a courageous hero. According to Aristotle, "it is right, then, to say that by doing what is just a man becomes just, and temperate by doing what is temperate, while without doing thus he has no chance of ever becoming good."[68] Therefore, it is only by doing that one can become the hero (i.e., talk is cheap). A superhero proves his or her courage by taking a step into danger when no one else will or no one else can. Each superhero world has its supervillains that cannot be defeated by normal means. This is why Superman has to step up against Lex Luthor, Spider-Man against the Green Goblin, Batman against The Joker, and so on.

When we think of humility it is hard not to go directly to Captain America. Steve Rogers is always trying to help others while downplaying his own amazing abilities.[69] Other superheroes are humble because they use an alter ego instead of taking credit for themselves. Except for a select few, the public does not know the true significance of people like Bruce Wayne, Peter Parker, Clark Kent, etc. The public knows that Steve Rogers is Captain America and yet he is humble enough on his own terms and does not need to hide any part of him from public view. Not all superheroes are always humble, however. The best example here is Tony Stark, who is well aware

of his own arrogance. This is not to say that Stark cannot be humbled because Pepper Potts as well as Captain America regularly bring his ego down to earth. Humility, just like with everyone else, is easier for some superheroes than others.

Righteous Indignation runs rampant through the superhero universes. While many superheroes are much more stoic about their motivations, others wear their heart on their sleeve. White notes that righteous indignation is essentially well-directed anger.[70] The best example of this type of virtue can be found through The Incredible Hulk. However, as seen in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Bruce Banner has difficulty directing his anger and needs assistance from Black Widow and others to keep it properly aimed. Imperfections like this make superheroes relatable to audiences. They have to overcome obstacles just like the rest of us. We all get mad, but superheroes use that anger and turn it into something useful.

Just about every superhero origin story deals with sacrifice and responsibility. Steve Rogers gave up an ordinary life, like many other superheroes, to pursue what was right. Without complaining, Steve became and continues to be Captain America through several films. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve gives up Peggy Carter (the love of his life) to keep the world safe. The main theme here is that superheroes sacrifice their private lives regularly or completely to the cause of something bigger than themselves. Even the arrogant Tony Stark is humble enough to know that there are causes larger than he is, which lead him to make sacrifices in his own life. Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent, and Peter Parker live disposable private lives because the responsibility they accept by becoming Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man is more important. Of course, Hydra agents may sacrifice for their cause, but superheroes understand this through a different lens. Batman, Superman, and Peter Parker have each lost important people at the hands of evil. Even Wonder Woman's origin is built on allowing one to live freely from oppression.[71] Villains seek

control, which is why superheroes fight to keep the control away from those with authoritarian visions so that people can live freely.

As an extension of sacrifice and responsibility, perseverance is the last key moral virtue of the superhero. White notes that we can insert many words here such as "resolve, determination, conviction, or strength of will."[72] Many superheroes have had to overcome incredible difficulties before truly becoming the hero. Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker lost their parents and decided to use that as part of their motivation to become a superhero. To become Batman and Spider-Man, a decision had to be made to become the hero instead of a permanent victim of their own life. Tony Stark began living on borrowed time ever since he had to build an artificial heart to keep himself alive in the first *Iron Man* film – yet he spends his time wisely and uses his newfound strength in a way that makes him a superhero.

The above virtues are central to what makes the superhero inspiring to myriad fans around the world. Superheroes are virtuous because their actions are based on moral choices. Robin S. Rosenberg has noted that "superheroes inspire us…their exploits and dedication are inspiring. Moreover, they have a clarity of purpose, and a moral compass that is usually enviable, even if we don't agree with the specifics."[73] Superheroes can battle supervillains or even each other and still manage to reflect some truth about the real world we live in. We respond to superheroes and supervillains because they represent us in many ways. These characters are super, but for the most part they are not perfect. Superheroes are easy to relate to because they are flawed, but inspirational because they carry the moral virtue that many find admirable.

Superheroes: Anti-Fascist, Moral Crusaders

Going back to the original thesis, superheroes do not create a fascist national complex but are instead popular because they create and revolve around inspirational moral virtue. The possession of courage, humility, righteous indignation, sacrifice and responsibility, and perseverance associated with an accepted moral compass is what makes a superhero special. A superpower alone does not equate to heroism, as evidenced by supervillains across the genre. Today, well over a decade into a major cycle of superhero films coming from Hollywood, we can conclusively argue that superheroes are not fascist and are instead inspirationally virtuous. A superhero contemplates the possible negative consequences of their actions or inactions on the world. This is something that a fascist would not consider because their actions are more selfish than selfless. Making the choice to do what is right, even if it is not easy, is inspiring.

It is the element of inspiration that comics and television writer/producer Jeph Loeb argues is one of the most important parts of the superhero canon.[74] Noting the importance of character identification, Loeb suggests, "Any depiction of good triumphing over evil, I believe, betters the world because it gives folks, particularly children, a version of right and wrong that they might not be getting in other ways."[75] Many of Loeb's comics have been the basis for superhero films and television shows. As a writer in the superhero genre, Loeb argues, "The moral stories we tell are very Biblical in nature, in the sense that there are consequences to the characters' actions."[76] Superheroes are faced with moral dilemmas just like the rest of us. We may not be able to relate to the ability to save the world, however, we can connect to questions about doing the right thing.

One may ask, however, how does a superhero differ from a traditional hero besides the possession of a superpower? The simple fact is that heroes are mortal while superheroes are immortal. Sure, our superheroes have died in individual stories, but their mythology always

continues. As A. David Lewis has observed, "the creation of the superhero was the 1930s response to morality, but not yet to mortality."[77] In the decades that followed, Superman has died in comics and film only to come back to save the day again. There is something timeless about the superhero. Lewis argues that what superheroes represent, "from immigration to the Depression, from racism to classism, from world affairs to local strife – can be boiled down to America negotiating a revised morality."[78] As we have seen, in many ways the struggles of superheroes are relatable to the challenges of our own lives. Generally speaking, we see in superheroes what we hope to see in ourselves (or others in our lives).

In contrast to a traditional hero, as Rosenberg argues, superheroes "are simultaneously like us and not like us."[79] Of course, no one has superpowers. However, there are good people in the world just like there are bad and we are all faced with decisions similar to what we see superheroes dealing with on an epic scale. Do we stand up to evil? Do we defend the defenseless? Do we act because it is the right thing to do? What are the consequences of our actions and what if we do not act at all? That these questions are even asked in the first place proves that superheroes are not fascist in any sense. Not asking the above questions or not tackling any of the aforementioned moral decisions could pave a path towards villainy and potential fascism. However, in order to be a superhero one must first be aware of the morality involved in their actions and take responsibility for the consequences of those actions. No true superhero is found without inspirational moral virtue, because without it they run the risk of becoming the supervillain.

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[1] A list of lifetime gross in theaters from the superhero genre can be seen at *Box Office Mojo*: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=superhero.htm

[2] Also, *Spider-Man* was rebooted with *The Amazing Spider Man* in 2012, a sequel in 2014, and another new Spider-Man in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).

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[3] These close-readings may change over time as well, since we often see films through the lens of our current surroundings. For the sake of debate, it may be useful to note that while sitting on a Comic-Con panel in 2016 Paul Levitz, former president of DC Comics, responded to the allegory by saying Christopher Nolan had no intention to making a parallel to terrorism in *The Dark Knight* (2008).

[4] Cooper, Richard. "Superheroes are a bunch of fascists." *Salon*. November 30, 2013. http://www.salon.com/2013/11/30/superheroes_are_a_bunch_of_fascists/. For a balanced overview of the many iterations of fascism see Paxton, Robert O. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

[5] Yogerst, "Stop Calling Superheroes Fascist," *The Atlantic*. 2013. http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/12/stop-calling-superheroes-fascist/281985/

[6] Howard, Adam. "Batman v Superman: Are both superhero icons inherently fascist?" *MSNBC*. March 28th, 2016. http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/batman-vs-superman-are-both-superhero-icons-inherently-fascist

[7] Paxton, p. 9.

[8] Paxton, p. 218.

[9] McTiernan interview by Ali

[10] Lee, Stan. "More Than Normal, But Believable." *What Is A Superhero?* Edited by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 115.

[11] Ibid, p. 116.

[12] Ibid, p. 117.

[13] Joeb, Jeph and Tom Morris. "Heroes and Superheroes." *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*. Edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris. (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005), p. 12.

[14] Ibid.

[15] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) originally printed in 1981, p. 23

[16] The panel was titled "Batman on Capmus." Uslan also taught the first accredited course on comics at Indiana University in 1971 before becoming the iconic producer and writer that he is widely known for today.

[17] Beaty, Bart. *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 113.

[18] Ibid, p. 115.

[19] Ong, Walter. "The Comics and the Super State." *The Superhero Reader*. Edited by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. 34-45. Ong's article originally appeared in *Arizona Quarterly*, autumn 1945, Vol. 1, no. 3.

[20] Ibid, p. 35.

[21] Ibid, 44.

[22] Nybert, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 155.

[23] Ibid, p. 165.

[24] Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. (New York: Main Road Books, Inc, 2004), p. 366. This book was originally published in 1954 by Rinehart & Company.

[25] Nybert, p. 166-169.

[26] Warshow, Robert. "Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham." *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 72. This essay was originally published in 1954.

[27] Shils, Edward. "Mass Society and Its Culture." *Mass Media in Modern Society*. Edited by Norman Jacobs. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. 46.

[28] Rosten, Leo. "The Intellectual and the Mass Media." *Mass Media in Modern Society*. Edited by Norman Jacobs. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), p. 114.

[29] Radecki is also a protester of television violence and all types of role-playing games.

[30] *Larry King Live*. "Debate on Violence in Comic Books 1989." YouTube Video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1014&v=ftjQc8_wB84. The episode originally aired on May 2nd, 1989.

[31] Kitchen Sink Press is known for publishing Flash Gordon.

[32] Kitchen said the doorman at his hotel in Washington DC told him not to walk the city alone and Kitchen argued that superheroes are a response to this kind of concern.

[33] Uslan interview that I conducted on September 27th, 2016.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] There have been several animated films based on the Justice League of America and the next feature film will be a two part franchise beginning in 2017.

[37] Lawrence, John Shelton and Robert Jewett. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 22.

[38] Ibid, p. 44.

[39] Ibid, p. 47.

[40] Jewett, Robert and John Shelton Lawrence. *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p. 26-43.

[41] Ibid, p. 39.

[42] Ibid, p. 42-43.

[43] Ali, Rasha. "Die Hard Director Rips Mad Max, Fascist Superhero Movies." The Wrap. July 12, 2016. http://www.thewrap.com/die-hard-john-mctiernan-mad-max-comic-book-movies/

[44] Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America,* p. 324.

[45] Ibid.

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[46] Sternheimer, Karen. *Pop Culture Panics: How Moral Crusaders Construct Meanings of Deviance and Delinquency.* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 93.

[47] Jewett, Robert and John Lawrence. "Heroes and Superheroes." *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*. Edited by John Lyden. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 400.

[48] Layman, C. Stephen. "Why be a Superhero? Why Be Moral?" *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*. Edited by Tom Morris and Matt Morris. (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005), p. 195.

[49] Layman, p. 181.

[50] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p. 25.

[51] Ibid, p. 28.

[52] Layman, p. 197.

[53] Ibid, p. 199.

[54] Ibid, p. 35.

[55] Wesselmann, Eric D. and J. Scott Jordan. "Wild Heroes: The Hard Work of Being Moral." *Captain America vs. Iron Man: Freedom, Security, Psychology*. (New York: Sterling, 2016), p. 117.

[56] Uslan interview.

[57] Ibid.

[58] During my interview, Uslan also pointed out that Christopher Nolan worked hard, with minimal CGI, to make Batman, the Joker, and Gotham City feel realistic. This was a story that felt possible in our world (not just the world created in comics). This is why the surveillance device becomes such a moral turning point in the film.

[59] Pizarro, David A. and Roy Baumeister. "Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography." *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*. Edited by Robin S. Rosenberg. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 19-20.

[60] Rosenberg, Robin S. "Our Fascination With Superheroes." *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*. Edited by Robin S. Rosenberg. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 4.

[61] Ibid, p. 120.

[62] For an overview of how the levels of moral decision-making apply to superhero comics see Wood, Mara. "Moral Decisions in Marvel's Civil War: Stages of Hero Development." *Captain America vs. Iron Man: Freedom, Security, Psychology*. (New York: Sterling, 2016), p. 11-23.

[63] Walter.

[64] Of course, there is the concern from Wayne that he will have to get the Batsuit out again in the future.

[65] Only those worthy are able to pick up Thor's hammer, which is part of the gag as others try to move it from the table. Steve Rogers begins to move it and the camera cuts to a visibly worried Thor before Steve puts it down and plays as if he can't move it.

[66] White, Mark D. *The Virtues of Captain America: Modern-Day Lessons on Character from a World War II Superhero* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), IX-X.

[67] Ibid, p. 45.

[68] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p. 30.

[69] White, p. 50.

[70] White, p. 54.

[71] See George Perez's *Wonder Woman #1* (1988).

[72] White, p. 64.

[73] Rosenberg, "Our Fascination With Superheroes," p. 14-15.

[74] Loeb, Jeph. "Making the World a Better Place." *What Is A Superhero?* Edited by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 119.

[75] Ibid, p 120. Loeb channels similar appreciation as Uslan does for how Batman teaches about moral codes.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Lewis, A. David. "Save the Day." *What Is A Superhero?* Edited by Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 32. (31-39)

[78] Ibid.

[79] Rosenberg, "Our Fascination With Superheroes," p. 17.

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