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My name is Jillian Danto, and my Writing and Rhetoric II professor, Sadaf Ferdowsi, encouraged me to submit my final research essay to the PWR Student Writers' Showcase.

*In the essay attached, I attempt to analyze the modern political climate of America, compared to a new era of superhero films, starting from the 2012 release of *The Avengers*. These films have emphasized that destruction leads to little consequence, that all villains can be seen as anti-heroes, and that fear leads to change, often for the worst. Due to the rise of "fake" news, I thought it was necessary to use these films as modern mythology, revealing the true state of the human psyche in a technologically advanced world where information is both readily available, and largely biased.*

Fear: A Modern American Superhero Movie

Superhero movies have changed from their humble beginnings as simple drawings on a page, and have evolved into something much darker. From colorful comic books, to the campy effects of the 70s and 80s, and now, as extraordinary catastrophes seem to terrorize even the most fearless of leaders, this genre has changed rapidly, despite having an almost identical plot every time. It is the hero's journey, and even if the hero does not win, they will in the next installment. Despite a predictable story arch, screenwriters have kept the attention of their audience without hesitation. This may be because of heavy existential subtext, drawing from the most human of fears: losing loved ones, losing sense of self, losing sense of success, and the list goes on. The potential of loss leads to fear. In a world of potential loss, the creeping fear cloaks the plot in order to challenge and influence an audience's own perspective.

Fear has been dealt with in the real world in several different ways: from religion, to organized government, to modern philosophy. In all of these cases, dealing with loss has always been tasked to a higher power, whether that is through god, an appointed official, or the inner workings of one's own brain. The contemporary superhero movie industry has taken notice, and adopted the fear into every script since *The Avengers*, suggesting themes such as humanism, nihilism, and religion as a means of coping with the inevitable. This evolution of the superhero movie also caters to a divided worldview, which has been most noticeable since the election of Donald Trump in the United States. While half of America's market may think the end justifies the means, the other half is strongly rooted in moralism. Either way, the superhero industry has a movie for everyone.

This shift in contemporary superhero culture started in 2012, with Marvel's release of *The Avengers*. This film follows the story of the ultimate superhero group comprised of Iron Man, a genius inventor, who also happens to be an archetypal cool kid; Captain America, the All-American soldier with a heart (and brain) from the 1940s; Black Widow, the only female Avenger who teeters between a complex female lead and a plot device for her male counterparts; Hawkeye, Black Widow's friend, who is good with an arrow; The Hulk, a big, green, sad boy; and Thor, a Norse god with limited social skills, but staggeringly good looks to make up for it (Lane). Besides for this redefining the genre by the sheer amount of lead heroes featured, this film also marked a change in the role of the villain.

While the main villain is Loki, Thor's emotionally damaged brother; the villain also becomes the Tesseract, an energy form that makes any man all-powerful. From these two evil forces, a new definition of the modern supervillain becomes defined for years to come. Loki is complicated, and arguably, more likeable than the Avengers themselves. In the personal lives of these Norse gods, Thor had always been favored, and would take over his father's throne, while Loki was denied the throne despite being the next in line (Marvel). This personal tension between hero and villain would be used in almost every superhero film after its release, unless the villain was more like the Tesseract. The Tesseract is an infinity stone, which harnesses some unknown universal power. Unlike Loki's introduction as the anti-hero, the Tesseract has no relation to the heroes whatsoever. It is just an object that can be used for good or evil, which makes it even more horrifying because power leads to madness in almost every case. The removed nature of villains, such as the Tesseract, as opposed to anti-heroes, such as Loki, was revolutionary for the superhero genre, and has opened the gate to complex analysis of superhero movies being critiques of the usage of power.

The modern universe of superheroes only makes one basic assumption: all people, or life forms that take a human form, are basically good. Everyone has a reason for being on the side that they are on. In *The Avengers*, the heroes assemble in order to stop Loki, who wants to enslave the world. Meanwhile, Loki thinks he is doing the right thing, which he states:

It's the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation [enslavement]. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel (Hiddelston).

In other words, both heroes and villains are dealing with the idea of defeat, but through two different viewpoints. The Avengers make the case for humanism. Despite being gifted with superpowers and intelligence, the heroes seem just like everyday people who want to defend their loved ones and themselves. The screenplay humanizes the heroes with its usage of humor and vulnerability, which can be seen in Iron Man's wit and Thor's ignorance, and other scenes highlighting each of the characters' more human qualities. Meanwhile, Loki makes the case for nihilism. Since he rebels against all forms of authority, he sees humanity as one object that has no free will, thus underlining his negligence of moral values (Lebovic 1). The Avengers win, tentatively, at the end, making the film's case for the support of humanism over nihilism, but the films to follow this only complicate matters.

After *The Avengers*, select superhero films operated as philosophical critiques of power, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which had almost identical moralistic features as *The Avengers*; *Suicide Squad*, which made a case for anti-heroes and nihilism; and, most recently, *Doctor Strange*, which reckoned with Western philosophy versus Eastern religion. Despite being similar to the morals and characterization of *The Avengers*, *Guardians of the Galaxy* provided a new, morphed supervillain. These villains were Thanos and Ronan, two larger than life megalomaniacs that were far stronger than any of the superheroes throughout the movie (Kenny). They had god-like powers because of their possession of an infinity stone. The fact that they had this power dehumanized them to the point in which they became close to the monotheist's view of god, operating on the fact that they were all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-vengeful (Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia). This, along with having physical attributes, led the Guardians to defeat him, since all-vengeful gods fall to the all-good heroes in this genre of film. The plot argues that there is a sprinkle of godliness in all people, no matter how meek.

Suicide Squad was reactionary to *The Avengers*, but this time, instead of focusing on a group of heroes fighting for justice, the Squad was assembled for a top secret mission that the fictionalized US intelligence hoped would get them all killed (Lemire). There were snippets of the backstories of each of the anti-heroes, mainly Harley Quinn, a psychologist turned psychopath due to her abusive relationship with the Joker; and Deadshot, a trained assassin who just wanted to provide for his family. Because of past traumas, the views of the Squad juxtapose that of the Avengers and the underlying moralism of the Marvel

Universe, assuming that all people are basically evil, and no one should be trusted. This creates the case for nihilism, and even anarchism, implying that a character's life and actions do not matter with an ending which has no consequences for the ruthless Squad.

Doctor Strange takes the prior lessons of these films and arches them into a realm of religion as a means of coping. The film follows Steven Strange, a gifted surgeon who had recently lost his dexterity due to a violent car crash. Though he is aware that there is no medical treatment for his fatal injuries, he invests his entire life into fixing himself, and finds out that he can, if he travels to Nepal to study under the Ancient One (Bastien). From there, the plot becomes directly metaphorical for religion. The Ancient One and her followers mirror the views of Taoism, favoring observation over knowledge, while their villainous counterparts, Mordo, mirror the views of Confucius, favoring order over humility. Upon finding out that the Ancient One had been drawing from the darkness of Mordo, Strange becomes skeptical, until taken aside and explained to that drawing from both the light and the dark can be the most beneficial path, which mirrors the values of Buddhism (Publishers Weekly 64). The villain is similar to the one invented in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, an all-powerful non-human that is only defeated by Strange's wit. From there, Strange decides to continue on the path that the Ancient One carved out for him, while her original followers flee with the knowledge that she had been drawing from the darkness all along.

It is impossible to continue without acknowledging that although these films may have deep subtexts regarding grief and power, they fail to understand other socio-political efforts that their films half-heartedly address. In *The Avengers* and *Suicide Squad*, Black Widow and Harley Quinn are the only female characters that their respective films focus on. Despite their backstory and function in their teams, they are still used as a plot device to influence and distract male-bodied characters due to their sex appeal. Harley Quinn had this built into her character ever since her introduction into the comic books, but Black Widow almost seemed like she could be seen outside of her sexuality when *The Avengers* franchise began. In *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Captain America: Civil War*, they use Black Widow almost solely as a plot device, creating romanticism between her and the Hulk, and later, her and Captain America. The usage of female protagonists further defines the superhero industry's misunderstanding of feminism (King 423). Although they created

strong female characters that have unique voices and motivations, their characterization will always be diminished by mainstream culture's gendered expectations.

Alongside gender bias, *Doctor Strange* has been garnering recognition for its role in racial bias. The Ancient One, played by Tilda Swinton, was originally a Tibetan man in the comics, but was recast as a Celtic woman for the film. This has been criticized widely, as one critic explained:

If the only way you can bypass these issues is to whitewash the part (yet keep the Asian setting and vague mysticism), the problem isn't the character, it's your lack of imagination as a creator (Bastien).

This theme throughout *Doctor Strange*, and every other superhero movie to a lesser extent, of westernizing Asian culture for the "accessibility" of a target American audience does not only undermine the culture portrayed, but reinforces outdated stereotypes. Moreover, Steven Strange's identity as a White man travelling to Nepal suggests imperialism, and the sensationalism of foreign practices; meanwhile his path throughout the film mirrors the "White Man's Burden" that has been present in American culture since the establishment of organized government (Kamovnika 48).

While these films reflect a White, male, heterosexual, Christian lens that mainstream culture tends to come from, the industry severely misunderstands inclusiveness. Marvel has been attempting to correct its indiscretions in the more feminist leaning *Jessica Jones* series, and the upcoming film *Black Panther*, which addresses race in the world of superheroes, but even these attempts do not mask moral bias implicit in every superhero film they have previously released. This moral bias does not affect the audience it attracts though, since these films tend to sell more tickets than any other film genre, with an estimated value of five hundred million dollars per film (Nash Information Services LLC).

This disregard for moralism on behalf of the viewers and the creators of these films is reflected in the political climate of today. This may be because, although the representation is lacking, the root of all of these stories feed into an audience's fear of an ominous evil. Between *The Avengers* and *Guardians of the Galaxy's* optimistic faith in humanity, versus *Suicide Squad's* disregard for anyone but one's own self, alongside *Doctor Strange's* alternative path to enlightenment, the solution to fear becomes blurred. While evil is easy to point out, recognizing the reasoning behind evil can sway even the most light

hearted of souls. In this way, superhero movies have become modern mythology for American culture, arguably predicting the election of Donald Trump.

During the election, it seemed clear. Hillary Clinton would win because she had been in politics and she would continue on the path of her successor, Barack Obama, while Donald Trump would lose due to his outrageous personality and antagonism of minorities. The polls showed that she would win the entire time, until the night she lost the election. In many ways, this election could be seen most clearly not through the news, but through the media being released all along.

Similarly, *The Avengers* was groundbreaking, but after its second film, the producers decided that the franchise needed a change of pace, which they implied at the end of *Age of Ultron*, when they introduced the new Avengers, which would consist of a completely new cast. This boredom of the old ways of optimistic humanism also led to an opportunity for the rise of *Suicide Squad* and other films based in anti-heroism, while *Doctor Strange* reflected an adoption of attempted multiculturalism, which actually served as a microscope on media bias. This new era of the anti-heroism, nihilism, and a misunderstanding of inclusion could be a way of understanding why this election turned out as it did.

At its core, the general American public is constantly nostalgic while wanting progression. This nostalgia can be seen through the Republican Party's praise of Reaganomics and the Democratic Party's continued effort to narrow wealth gaps between classes (DNC). Progression, however, is viewed in a more complicated matter: the Democratic Party is progressive namely in identity politics, while the Republican Party wants to progress towards the past, which has been apparent through Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." This suggests that America can only progress as a country if the government moves backwards towards less federal regulations.

These themes from the Democrats and Republicans can be seen using superhero movies as metaphors. Hillary Clinton's campaign had a traditional superhero approach. She played up her minority status in order to appeal to the humanity of everyday people. She talked about being a mother, a woman, and a wife throughout her campaign, while acknowledging the displacement of minorities in America. Donald Trump, on the other hand, played the anti-hero. Unlike his opponent, he antagonized minorities and was open about his view of women as objects. Though this seems unappealing on paper, his campaign was effective, much like Loki and the villains in *Suicide Squad*.

What anti-heroes do is that they draw upon a population's fear. Trump drew from the fear of a successful change from typical White patriarchal system to return to a radicalized version of a homogenous American culture. The Obamas and the Clintons challenged a systematic norm, and created change, just as other presidents have done in the past, but since their identities do not align with those of the imagined All-American household, the vote rebelled against continued progress.

The shock from this election came mostly from the disregard of Trump's corrupt business empire. Despite multiple tweets, recorded quotations, and court cases from the President-elect, these citations did not deter his fan base. This comes from the fact that beyond a political divide in America, there is a moralistic one as well. While half of the country may think that the end justifies the means, the other half is rooted in solving systematically engrained problems that could affect generations to come. These systematic problems can be seen in the misunderstanding of feminism, multiculturalism, and imperialism as outlined by the film industry.

While these superhero movies reflect the fears and hopes of modern America, they fail to propose any worthwhile solutions or political statements. These films may be originally intended to simply entertain, but because of the political climate, it seems that all media should be looked at critically in order to analyze how future generations could change the present without reverting to the past. Even with changes being made to the industry, it is difficult to predict how progressive these films will actually be due to the success of Trump and the decline of moralism in America.

It is hard to differentiate anti-heroes from villains if there is only a single story: the narrative that mass media has relayed to the public. Trump seems to have convinced half of America that he is an anti-hero, while the other half is convinced he is a villain. His story will continue to unfold during the course of his term as President, but he has already changed the narrative of America. While Obama led a country into humanistic integrity, Trump has already begun to lead American culture to a future of nihilistic nostalgia. The power he has been given as President can be viewed as the closest thing to a real-world infinity stone, which, as outlined by *Guardians of the Galaxy*, will guarantee that if he remains idealistic, his characterization as an anti-hero will almost certainly become villainous.

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