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# Superhero Movies & Politics: The Moral Obligations of Film Makers According to Virtue Ethics

By Russell Hendrickson

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy

Linfield College

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SUPERHERO MOVIES, AND POLITICS: THE MORAL OBLIGATIONS OF FILM MAKERS ACCORDING TO VIRTUE ETHICS

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## Introduction

On February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Marvel Studios released the superhero film *Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* was critically acclaimed and quickly became a commercial success. The story of the film focused on king T'Challa of Wakanda, as he was forced into battle with Kilmonger, a villain who sought to usurp T'Challa's throne as part of a plan to launch a violent global revolution that he believed would help restore power to oppressed minority groups around the world. One element that the film was praised for was its commitment to exploring political themes within its central narrative. A review for film published in *The Atlantic* noted that while other superhero films had dealt with political issues in peripherally of haphazardly, the political issues raised in *Black Panther* were critical to the film's central narrative (Orr, 2018).

*Black Panther* is especially unique when one considers that the few other superhero films that have attempted to do incorporate political themes into their narratives have not always been as well received. Consider the film *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*. Released in 1987, the film followed Superman as he attempted to resolve the developing global nuclear arms race, while battling the villainous entity called Nuclear Man. The film was critically panned. One of the many elements of the film that received criticism was how it ultimately handled its message about the need to rid the world of nuclear missiles. A film critic for the LA times wrote that the film "dulls and dampens its own preachments" (Wilmington, 1987).

In both circumstances, the filmmakers developing these movies decided to introduce political themes into the central narrative of films they were creating. Both movies were arguably created with noble intentions and were trying to spread positive messages about the need for social change, but while *Superman IV* was met with disdain, critics fell in love with *Black*

*Panther*. However, regardless of the reception these movies received, I would argue that in endeavoring to explore political themes, the filmmakers who crafted *Black Panther* and *Superman IV* were fulfilling a specific moral imperative.

The theory of virtue ethics implies that filmmakers have a moral obligation to explore political themes within superhero films. My thesis will be comprised of four main sections. I will begin by discussing the general theory of virtue ethics and what moral obligations are placed upon someone who subscribes to this moral theory. From there I will establish my argument for why film can be used as a tool of moral education, and outline a framework for how artists can work to cultivate virtue in themselves through the use of Arnold Berleant's *Artists and Morality: Toward an Ethics of Art* as a guide. In my second section I will argue why superheroes have the capacity to serve as strong moral role models and why they are better suited to serving as strong role models above other fictional characters. I will also discuss what kind of virtues superheroes should embody if they are supposed to be role models and how endeavoring to make superheroes good role models inevitably means that we need to show these characters interacting with political issues. Sections three and four will attempt to define what makes propaganda art distinct from political commentary, and how my larger argument is affected by whether we subscribe to the literary theory known as death of the author.

The goal of this project is to explore a potential set of moral obligations that artists are subject to when crafting a piece of work, and to help artists consider how they can work to cultivate virtuous character traits within themselves through the act of creating a work of art such as a feature film. I chose to explore this issue in relationship to superhero movies specifically because of their current popularity among the public and the fact that I believe superheroes have

a unique capacity to serve as moral educational tools. With that in mind let us consider the theory of virtue ethics.

### **Section 1**

The theory of virtue ethics asks individuals to cultivate good character within themselves by striving to embody specific sets of virtues, best as described qualities which help promote well-being or flourishing. There is no comprehensive list of virtues, but examples include bravery, selflessness, honesty, and compassion. It is also important to recognize that when someone acts in accordance with one these virtues, they are acting rationally. (Hursthouse, 2018). Each virtuous trait serves as a mean that lies between a vice of excess and one of deficiency (Athanasoulis, n.d.). This means that a person is being brave if they are working to overcome their fears but not to the point where they are risking sufficient harm to themselves or others for reasons that would not be considered justifiable. Dancing on the railroad tracks for fun as a train is approaching wouldn't be considered an example of bravery. One would be indulging in the excess vice of rashness because they are putting their life at risk for no rational or justifiable reason. Likewise, one shouldn't exercise so much caution around trains that one is actively avoiding them because one is afraid that the next time they see a train he/she somehow get hurt. That would be considered an unjustifiable exercise of caution and one would be therefore indulging in cowardice. Bravery is a sort of mean that lies somewhere in between actively avoiding situations that terrify one's self all together, and actively seeking out scenarios that put one's safety at risk for unjustified reasons.

Role models are critical to the theory of virtue ethics because according to Aristotle we can learn how to behave in a virtuous manner by modeling the behaviors of individuals who are



already moral human beings (Athanasoulis, n.d.). Humans are born with a wide variety of behaviors both good and bad, but moral virtues do not arise in us naturally. We can only become virtuous by practicing virtuous behavior in day to day life, meaning that being virtuous is a product of habituation. Just as we learn how to write, or play a sport from a teacher, we need someone to teach us how to cultivate the right habits. (Aristotle, 2011, p.158-159). For example, one can learn selflessness by watching another person commit selfless acts like donating money to charities instead of buying a video game for themselves. Role models are the only possible means of learning what constitutes good moral character and what doesn't, which is why they are so important. When we try to find role models for ourselves it is important that we identify people have cultivated virtuous traits within themselves to the best of human ability. The strength of the teacher that we chose will determine the extent of our capacity to be virtuous.

With this framework in mind let's consider what types of moral obligations a filmmaker might be subject too based on the criteria of virtue ethics. A filmmaker's obligations are dependent upon whether art and the medium of film has the capacity to serve as means of education others about what constitutes as virtuous behavior. I believe that films can serve as valuable instrument of moral education, because they have the capacity to promote reflection by modeling different aspects of human experience. This can help individuals consider what it means to live so they are cultivating good moral character within themselves.

The idea that art can be used as an instrument of moral educational has been proposed Plato, in his dialogue *The Republic*. Plato claimed art was to be considered dangerous because of the way it could inspire citizens to do things like question government authority. These views are made apparent in the dialogue when the character of Socrates describes the characteristics of a utopian society. When describing how he would educate individuals who would be designated

from birth to be “guardians” within this society, he emphasizes the need to supervise storytellers as a means of shaping the moral development of children (Plato, 1997, p.1016). He was concerned that if people heard a story describing a character who is engaging in behavior that is immoral and the poem did not show that character suffer any negative consequences as the result of his behavior, then people would sympathize with such a character. This would in turn lead them to believe that behavior modeled in the story was acceptable and put them at risk of duplicating it in real life (p.1017).

Plato believed that the way that art influences morality is connected to its capabilities for create a sympathetic emotional response within its audience members. When discussing poetry, he speaks of how it stimulates the expression of emotions and desires that we need to learn to learn to control such as aggression or sexual desire (p.1211). Allowing these emotions to reign unchecked would ultimately lead to the development of poor moral character.

The portion of Plato’s claim that I want to focus on here is that idea that art can stimulate emotional responses in its audience. Plato stops short of establishing why an artistic medium such as poetry has the potential to create a sympathetic emotional response in those who are exposed to it. I believe that the emotional response that Plato identifies is a product of the capacity a piece of art has to encourage the use of imagination.

The relationship between art and imagination is outlined effectively by John Dewey in his essay *Art and Civilization*. In the essay, John Dewey argues that art is beneficial because in stimulating imagination it helps people reflect upon the current state of the world and how it can change. He goes so far as to argue that the very ideal factors that characterize moral outlooks are in and of themselves imaginative. This makes art more moral than the general moral policies that govern a society, because those are concentrations of the institutional status quo, that is, they are

products of the dominating political and economic infrastructures. (Dewey, 1995, p.523-525)

Dewey's point about imaginations connection to morality is relevant to the theory of virtue ethics because without imagination one cannot cultivate virtues habits. They will not be able to imagine a version of themselves that is superior to who they are now, and by extension how to adopt the practices of their role model within their day to day life. Without the capacity to picture an ideal moral version of themselves to serve as a guide for their personal development, they will be incapable of achieving any real change in their behavior.

Imagination is the mechanism that drives emotional responses and it is through our capacity for emotional connection that moral reflection is possible. Works of art ask us to consider alternate interpretations of reality using imagination, they help us to question the justifications behind our behaviors and consider whether we are truly behaving in a moral manner within our day to day lives. As I stated previously, one of the key components of the theory of virtue ethics is built on the idea that people have the capability to witness the virtuous behaviors of other individuals and model them in turn. Virtue ethics cannot work if an individual cannot imagine a more virtuous version of themselves, or contrast their own behaviors with that of a role model. If art can help us to imagine what it looks like to behave in a manner that is truly moral, and prompt us to reflect upon own behaviors meet this standard, then it can be used as a tool for cultivating moral virtue.

As art, film possesses this capacity to promote moral reflection through the stimulation of imagination. Film's capacity to elicit both positive and negative emotional responses from its audience has been documented: for example, a psychological study from 1997 that tracked increases in aggression after participants viewed clips from violent movies concluded, "watching a brief clip of moderately violent scenes can increase feelings of hostility, and did so in an

audience that had not been provoked in any way” (Anderson, 1997, p.173). Another study, conducted in 2012 found that individuals exposed to entertainment that features portrayals of acts of moral virtue such as altruism elicited feelings of elevation, which in turn gave rise to a desire to embody the virtuous character traits being witnessed (Oliver, 2012).

With that said it is important to recognize that we cannot draw a direct link between witnessing a character behave amorally in film that is rewarded and them duplicating it later in life. Long term effects of exposure to certain media have yet to be established because they are difficult to track, due in part due to the large number of variables that need to be accounted for. The fact that an individual chose to watch *The Punisher* over a Superman movie doesn't guarantee that they are going to go out and commit a murder later in life. By the same token watching a Superman movie yields no guarantee that an individual will take on a more friendly and compassionate demeanor later in life. Regardless, Plato's claim about arts capacity to manipulate character through sympathetic emotion still stands. Media clearly generates some level of influence over what types of habits we believe are valuable and desire to cultivate in ourselves, be they virtues or vices.

Well-crafted films can function as thought experiments that can help us explore moral questions preoccupying society. If art can stimulate emotional responses within its audience then this lends further support to Dewey's argument that art can promote moral reflection through imagination. It means we have a capacity to connect with the characters in film and consider their beliefs and behaviors just as we can do with real people. Because a work of art can have the potential to help educate others about morality through the promotion of self-reflection, this means filmmakers are acting in some capacity as moral educators. They are the ones who create opportunities for moral reflection and construct the moral narratives that an audience will be

exposed to. They determine which acts a fictional character will engage in within the film they are crafting, and in turn which actions will be rewarded. They are the ones crafting the thought experiment. The ethical conclusions people might draw from a superhero movie might not be universally identical, but they can still promote discussion and reflection among the people who watch them. With this information in mind, let us consider what kind of moral obligations the role of being an artist places upon filmmakers.

Arnold Berleant explores the moral obligations of artists in his essay *Artists and Morality: Towards the Ethics of Art*. The obligations he believes are placed upon artists provide a useful framework for trying to determine what it means for an artist to behave in a virtuous manner. Berleant agrees that artists serve as moral educators when they share their works with the public. Berleant recognizes that the practical effects that a piece of art can bring about are not always predictable, and that we cannot create an artistic piece to fulfil a single specific intended function (Berleant, 1977, p.197). Individuals will respond to whatever message a piece of art contains differently depending on their own perspectives, but just like a teacher an artist can use their work to make people aware of new ideas and experiences. In his article Berleant identifies and examines three specific sets of moral obligations he believes that artists are subject to. First, artists are subject to the same moral obligations as any other human being. Second, artists are subject to the obligations that apply to them because of their status as social participants. Third and finally, artists are subject to the unique moral obligations that are derived from the specific tasks and powers that the position of being an artist confers upon them (p.196).

Berleant's first claim, that artists are subject to the same moral responsibilities as any other human being, recognizes that the positions artists occupy within their respective societies are arbitrary ones. Simply taking on the role of an artist does not somehow allow a person to live

outside of the moral code that all human beings are subject to, and there is no logical reason that it should.

If artists are supposed to cultivate virtuous qualities within themselves then developing a character designed to serve as some type of moral exemplar, such as a superhero, becomes a method for the artists to cultivate virtues within themselves. Portraying such a character asks an individual to actively consider what it means to be a truly virtuous person. Therefore, they will inevitably have to reflect upon whether their own behaviors can be considered virtuous. They will have to consider what a quality like bravery looks like and how much bravery they possess in themselves. If creating a character that serves as a role model helps the artist to learn what it means to be a good person, then an artist would have a moral obligation to create such a character, because they would be ignoring an opportunity to become more virtuous.

Making the decision to keep this knowledge for themselves would also be counterintuitive because it would not be virtuous to prevent others becoming virtuous. If the goal of virtue ethics is to promote well-being/flourishing, then someone who is truly compassionate and selfless would not avoid taking opportunities to help others flourish by passing on their personal knowledge and insights. A role model would be able to recognize their own inherent value as a moral teacher, and their virtuous character traits would naturally drive them to help others by teaching them about what habits qualify as virtuous and which ones do not. If they chose not to share their insights about cultivating moral character with others, they would be allowing vices such as self-centeredness, and indifference to flourish within themselves. As I have established film has the capacity to promote moral reflection among its viewers. This means that to truly behave in a virtuous manner a filmmaker needs to share their art with others, so that people can have the opportunity to reflect on their personal moral development.

Berleant's second set of obligations concerns the influence that artists can have over the public due to the nature of their profession. For example, making the choice to participate in an art festival that is sponsored by a tyrannical government could be viewed as the artist providing an endorsement of that government. Berleant believes it is important for artists to consider the unique social status that their position affords them and how their influence can be used for good or ill (p.197). Of course, when they choose to navigate such issues they still must do so based upon the ethical codes that all of humanity would be subject to within that context.

By the standards of virtue ethics, the artist should recognize that they have the potential to serve as role models for other individuals. Simply by making a choice to knowingly work with an individual or individuals who are not virtuous, the artist would be conveying some type of support for their behavior. This means the artist would not be fulfilling their responsibility to be a good role model for other people because they would be endorsing behaviors that would be classified as vices rather than virtues. As we have established, artists would need to strive to be virtuous like any other human being, but the unique position they occupy in society increases their general visibility to the public. This means a greater number of people are likely to look to artists as potential role models, especially those who endeavor to become artists themselves. The nature of the artist's obligation to be a good role model has not changed but the overall capacity in which they serve as role models, and the circumstances in which they will be required to practice virtuous behaviors, will be unique a unique product of the increased visibility that is brought about by their profession.

The third set of moral obligations that Berleant discusses is rooted in his belief that artists can reveal some truth about the world or experience within their work. For Berleant, the pieces that an artist creates help to promote awareness of our relationship to reality. He writes, that

artists are, "...offering others not only opportunities for heightened sensibility, expression, communication or imaginative representation, but unique occasions for exposure, discovery and an intensified awareness of the world for human beings" (p.198). This means that an artist has an obligation to try to recognize the true capacities their work has for reflecting elements of reality, and avoid exploiting those capacities for self-gain or at the expense of the public. Berleant argues that when artists neglect to focus on exploring some aspect of the relationship between humanity and our universe, they are being immoral (Berleant, p.198-199). Therefore, artists have an obligation to follow the demands of their creative impulses because they are working to reveal these truths. Berleant writes,

"There is what I call a 'morality of creativity,' one that demands honesty of artists more than truth, that condemns them for acquiescing in formulas and other facile solutions, and that denies them respect when they repeat themselves without pursuing artistic search for new dimensions of awareness. It may occur that the demands of their art clash with their own political or religious convictions or lead to the personal quandary of an apprentice whose artistic development compels him to reject the style of the master whom he respects and admires. Such a morality rather urges artists to follow the demands of their art and their own creative impulse (p.199)."

Berleant feels that artists should focus on following the creative impulses they have when crafting a piece, and should not succumb to the temptation of outside influences such as financial compensation. This remains true even if those impulses happen to run counter to a deeply held religious or political conviction (p.199). Berleant is also drawing a sharp distinction between artistic sincerity and the sincerity of an individual person. He is claiming that it is possible for an artist to be honest in the sense that they are staying committed to their personal creative vision, while at the same time engaging in dishonest actions such as lying to their spouse about an affair.

This should not be misinterpreted as advocating for the act of self-indulgence. For example, it would not be morally acceptable for an artist to demand that their paintings only ever be displayed in frame comprised entirely of pure gold. Such a behavior would arguably be selfish



and egotistical, both qualities that could be classified as vices and not virtues. Berleant is not advocating for artists to indulge in their selfish or egotistical impulses, but rather to use their creative impulses as a means of discovery. This point is illustrated when he claims that being true to their creative impulse may mean that an artist is forced to ignore their personal convictions, such as their political and religious values. He believes that art has the capacity to reveal information about the world around us, and that artists fulfill this objective when they stay true to their creative instincts. Berleant himself writes, that this obligation demands of the artist a type of honesty, and honesty would be classified as a virtuous quality that individuals should try to cultivate in themselves. This third obligation is an extension of the obligation all humans have based on the criteria of virtue ethics, because honesty is arguably a virtue.

When an artist neglects their responsibility to explore aspects of reality in their work they are being dishonest. It would be become impossible for any character they create to serve as a strong role model, because their character will be susceptible to behave in ways that are unbelievable, and they will thereby be incapable of being a useful tool of moral reflection. Failing to obey this third obligation means a writer will not be cultivating virtuous character within themselves, and that people who view their work will also be deprived of moral insight.

## **SECTION 1.2**

The obligation to honesty is something that I believe is essential when it comes to creating meaningful political commentary. It is the primary factor that makes a superhero movie such as *Black Panther* to be successful in its mission to comment on politics while films such as *Superman IV* fail. Artists such as filmmakers may go in trying to make a specific statement, but if they neglect their responsibility to exploring the nature of human existence then their message

is doomed to fail. To understand why this occurs let's consider a passage from the essay *Everybody's Protest Novel* by James Baldwin.

In his essay, Baldwin decries the popular abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for its overreliance on sentimentality. Baldwin criticizes its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, for using her book to elicit an emotional response from the reader to perpetuate her political message rather than trying to explore the human condition and the reality in which we inhabit (Baldwin, 1998, p.11-12). Baldwin argues that this is detrimental to the overall quality of Stowe's novel and any attempt to perpetuate a progressive message within the larger political discussion within society, because it is ultimately dishonest. Baldwin writes,

“...the avowed aim of the American protest novel is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed. They are forgiven, on the strength of these good intentions, whatever violence they do to language, whatever excessive demands they make of credibility. It is, indeed, considered the sign of a frivolity so intense as to approach decadence to suggest that these books are both badly written and wildly improbable. One is told to put first things first, the good of society coming before niceties of style or characterization (p.15).”

*Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* embodies Baldwin's criticisms of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The film is arguably more concerned with eliciting an emotional response about the danger of nuclear weapons, and making generic moral proclamations, than it is trying to explore the nature of international politics within a human context. The film doesn't make any attempt to explore how the nuclear arms race has evolved as a product of human desires, fears, and the larger political infrastructures that govern our day to day lives. Its failures are best exemplified by the scene where Superman walks in to the United Nations and announces his intention to rid the world of all nuclear weapons. The representatives of the UN respond by immediately bursting into applause. No one raises any kind of objection to his actions; in the next sequence we see military outposts from around the world freely giving their nukes to Superman so that he can throw them into the sun (Golan & Furie, 1987). If someone in real life had the capacity to rid

the planet of all nuclear weapons, appointed themselves responsible for doing so, and made a similar declaration in front of the United Nations, they would be met with distrust and hostility.

As Baldwin warned, the complex nature of the human experience, specifically the motivations and responsibilities that influence the actions of world political leaders and citizens, has been ignored in favor of perpetuating a generic message about the importance of peace. As a result, this scene damages Superman's capacity to serve as a credible role model because it fails to portray any kind of virtuous action that is relevant to the real world. No one can single handedly remove all nuclear weapons from earth and even if they could they would come into conflict with political leaders who feel it is smarter to keep them. In showing that he is worried about the danger that nuclear weapons pose to humanity, Superman is at least demonstrating some level of compassion for others, which is a virtuous quality. Otherwise, the actions the character takes in the film do not give us any true insight about what a truly virtuous human being should do if they want to put an end to the threat of nuclear weapons.

*Superman IV* fails on Baldwin's account because it neglects to consider the morality of creativity. Instead, it favors the heavy-handed moralizing that Baldwin identified in Stowe's novel. The filmmakers don't meet their artistic responsibility to capture human experience and the greater message they wish to impart ultimately suffers for it. If an artist is supposed to explore the relationships humanity has with reality as Berleant believes, then that would mean an artist should try to portray the fictional characters they are developing as if they possess the same thoughts and attitudes of real people.

By contrast, consider *Black Panther*. The film clearly includes political commentary but the reason it succeeds at communicating its message is specifically because it was focused on trying to explore larger political themes using the moral conflicts that characterize actual human

experiences. The themes are directly connected to the protagonist's internal struggle to determine what it means to be a good person. He questions whether he has a moral responsibility to help the people who are struggling in nations around the world, or whether he has a greater responsibility to provide for his people. T'Challa, the protagonist, is learning to cultivate the qualities of a good person within himself he is forced to confront complex political issues that are prevalent within his life. When the film's antagonist, Killmonger, challenges T'Challa's political assumptions, T'Challa comes to empathize with his point of view. At the end of the film T'Challa makes it his mission to help people around the world who are growing up in similar socio-economic backgrounds to the one Killmonger grew up in. T'Challa's recognition of the need for political change in his country stems from the fact that he truly embodies the virtue of compassion and selflessness. It is compassion that allows him to recognize how Killmonger became a villain because of personal tragedy, and his selflessness that motivates him to use his country's vast resources to help change the world for the better.

The filmmakers connect political themes to T'Challa's character arc, and in doing so winds up creating a stronger message. In a 2018 interview director Ryan Coogler is quoted as saying "We wanted it set in a real world and that's kind of how the character saw himself, how he identified himself, as a politician, so through that it's definitely a political film (McVey, 2018)." The reason that *Black Panther* ultimately succeeds at incorporating political commentary into its central narrative is that it did not neglect actual human experience in favor of trying to make a larger grandiose statement about the nature of the world. Instead the conflicts that drive the film are ones that are born out of the protagonist's personal values and failings.

*Black Panther* is therefore unlike *Superman IV*, which fails to offer any meaningful insight into why the political problem it discusses has developed, or how we could work to solve

it in the real world. Regardless of whether the filmmakers might have desired to explore the developing nuclear arms race on a social level, any authenticity is thrown out the window once the scene at the UN assembly plays. In creating a protagonist who is confronted with a political issue, and then charting how his perspective on that issues comes to change overtime, *Black Panther* manages to maintain a level of authenticity that *Superman IV* does not possess.

If an artist is to succeed in using art as a means of exploring a political issue, then they must work to ensure that they are not ignoring the realities of human experience. Baldwin and Berleant both realize how crucial this element is when it comes to developing works of art that are products of honesty. When filmmakers neglect to make exploring the relationship between humanity and the world a priority, then they succumbed to dishonesty. They have chosen to ignore the moral obligations that virtue theory places upon them. They are failing to cultivate the virtue of wisdom because they are intentionally restricting the degree to which they are analyzing the political they are writing about. In turn, the artist will also come to fail at being a good role model to others because the insights they offer to others through their work about what it means to be virtuous will be fundamentally flawed. Using a work of art for political commentary will be most effective when the artist remembers how art evokes imagination to help us consider moral scenarios and promote self-reflection rather than trying to advance a single statement at any cost.

## **SECTION 2**

I now examine the role of the superhero as a tool for moral reflection specifically. Just because art can serve as an instrument of moral education, it does not follow that we can or should look at a character like Black Panther or Superman and try to model ourselves based on the behavior of

these characters. However, I believe that virtue theory implies we should use superheroes as role models and that superheroes have the capacity to serve as stronger moral role than human beings and most other fictional characters.

Let's begin by establishing why fictional characters are qualified to serve as an effective role models. Fictional characters such as superheroes can serve as role models because they are still capable of modeling important characteristics like bravery and courage even though they are not real. Mark White argues this point in his book, *The Virtues of Captain America*. He acknowledges that while a fictional character cannot function as a role model in the same capacity that a living human being can, the fictional character can still model the virtues that we need to commit ourselves to cultivating (White, 2014, p.28). White also points out that we don't know everything about figures such as presidents, and political activists, and that we can't guarantee with absolute certainty that everything we know about them is true (p.28). We construct personal narratives about these people based on the limited information about them we have, and these narratives inform our perceptions no matter how limited they may be.

The issue then becomes why superheroes deserve special consideration for serving as role models above other fictional characters. Let's return to the arguments John Dewey proposed in *Art and Civilization*. As shown previously, Dewey considered the ideal factors in every moral outlook to be imaginative. In Dewey's view, art does a better job at portraying true morality because morality is imaginative (Dewey, 1995, p.524). Virtues such as bravery, honesty, and integrity are concepts that we imagine and try to put into effect in real life.

Fictional characters model imaginative properties including virtues such as compassion, generosity or bravery. A fictional character arguably becomes better at portraying a moral virtue than a human being can. Like traits such as compassion, fictional characters exist in the abstract.

The claims that Dewey makes about the nature of morality are reminiscent of Plato's theory of forms, alternatively known as the theory of ideas (Rogers, 515). Plato's theory is worth considering because if we accept it as true then that would mean that fictional characters are better at modeling moral virtues than real people.

Plato believed that objects as they exist in nature are susceptible to change and degradation. However, there are perfect Forms of the properties that we see represented within our world (Sedley, 2016, p.16). The concept of a perfect triangle, for example, exists completely independent from our physical reality. (Silverman, 2014) The forms Plato describes only exist in abstract terms rather than in our physical world, which means they can only be known using the mind and exist as ideas. Plato supports his theory by connecting it to the nature of knowledge and truth.

If truth is constant, then that means that every existing property must have some sort of fundamental essence attached to it, including concepts such as justice (Sedley, 2016, p.16). Virtuous qualities such as selflessness and bravery must then also have some sort of essence that exists completely independent from the people trying to practice them within day to day life. While it is true that we may often disagree about the nature of virtues such as bravery, it is not because these virtues are relative or subjective but rather it is because they are difficult to comprehend and define (ibid).

If we are to conclude that virtuous qualities exist in abstract terms, then this means that fictional characters are perfectly suited to being strong role models, because they can perfectly model virtuous character traits in such a way that real human beings cannot. Any time someone in real life tries to model these behaviors they will only be able to showcase corrupted versions of true virtues. What matters is if they are written well enough that a person can recognize when

that character is replicating virtuous behaviors. A character like Superman is not subject to the constraints of our reality. If anything, this means that fictional characters like superheroes are better role models than real people, because while they can behave in a perfectly virtuous manner, real people are imperfect and likely cannot hope to ever become perfectly virtuous.

Superheroes then become the best possible candidates for serving as role models because they are written to portray humanity at its best. These characters are archetypes for virtuous behavior, and can therefore possess the most virtuous characteristics out of all fictional characters. In their stories, they moral crises within the worlds they inhabit and work to resolve them to the best of their ability.

A fictional character like Black Panther then becomes a standard of virtue. People can watch the Black Panther film and learn how to embody virtuous qualities by identifying situations where the character acts in a manner that is brave, and then reflecting on what it would look like to live by those same virtues within their daily lives. Maybe one can't be brave by engaging in a fistfight with a villain who wants to conquer the world with futuristic weaponry, but they can show bravery in other ways that are applicable to real life, such as standing up to a bully. Most people will never be king or queens in charge of their own country, but just as T'Challa begins to think critically about whether he should continue to uphold the isolationist status quo established by Wakanda's prior kings, we can all think critically about the policies of our governments and who those policies are really helping.

It is true that some superheroes, like Spider-man, also have the capacity to display vices such as selfishness. In the second feature film based on character, *Spider-man 2*, Peter Parker makes the decision to quit being Spider-man because he decides to put his own desires for happiness above any obligation he might have to help others. This choice is clearly selfish and



not virtuous. However, what matters is whether these vices are rewarded within the narrative being constructed or are portrayed as defects that need to be overcome. In, *Spider-man 2* Peter Parker makes the choice to quit being Spider-man because of the harm it has on his personal life. He intentionally makes a selfish choice, but the movie portrays his selfishness as a vice and Peter is motivated to change and resume being Spider-man when he realizes his mistakes.

There is also no reason that a person cannot have multiple different role models that each specialize in exemplifying specific virtues. Even superheroes who are not completely perfect still represent some virtuous qualities that are worth embodying. Someone can look to a character like Spider-man and admire his compassion, while at the same time looking to *Black Panther* to serve as their role model for selflessness.

## **SECTION 2.2**

Up until this point I have established art's capacity for moral reflection but I have neglected to outline in detail why filmmakers have an obligation to incorporate political commentary specifically into their work. This obligation stems directly from the nature of what it means to be good under the criteria of virtue ethics.

For Aristotle, cultivating virtuous behavior and politics were irrevocably intertwined. Aristotle describes politics as the very process by which we evaluate and determine what can be considered good for humanity within *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2011, p.154-155). Aristotle goes on to describe how the legislation set in place by governments is a valuable tool that can be used to help promote virtuous behavior among citizens (p.172-173). Of course, how

effective the legislation a government creates is, depends in part upon the moral character of political leaders.

If politics is the means by which we determine what is generally good for humanity, then the act of choosing to reflect upon political issues, and actively participate in one's political community becomes a means of cultivating virtuous character within oneself. If one does not participate in politics then they are arguably indulging in their personal vices. They are depriving themselves of experiences that will help them learn to be virtuous, and one can only be virtuous if one has the capacity to reason what is virtuous. One is also arguably being selfish if they intentionally ignore issues that have an impact on the well-being of others. This means that citizens of a state have a moral obligation to participate in politics because they are still human beings and still subject to the fundamental laws established by the theory of virtue ethics. If they do not participate, they are depriving themselves of the chance to grow into better human beings.

Because superheroes can serve as strong moral role models, and filmmakers have responsibility to help educate others morally, filmmakers should show superheroes as political animals when possible. Neglecting to do so means the superhero becomes a weaker role model because we are not getting to see how their virtuous behavior translates into all aspects of life beyond simply fighting supervillains. If a superhero ignores political issues altogether, then they are not being good role models, because they are ignoring opportunities to become better human beings, and issues that directly pertain to promoting the general good within society.

Avoiding the exploration of topics and themes related to politics in art is ultimately counter intuitive to the practice of virtue ethics. The virtuous traits these characters embody will help us reflect on what constitutes good character in all aspects of life, and lead us to decide whether political figures possess good character. For example, seeing a character like Black

Panther using his power to set up outreach programs to help people in foreign nations will help people reflect upon what selflessness looks like, which will influence how they identify selfless characteristics elected officials and political candidates.

The stability of governments often face threats from individuals indulging in their own vices, including ones such as human selfishness. Selfishness can motivate people in positions of power to abuse that power to fulfill their own selfish desires. It could motivate someone to seek a position in government as a means of achieving large scale recognition and making money. This is why the practical wisdom that Aristotle describes is important. It is what helps citizens and politicians understand what is the general good when it comes to elements such as legislation (p.167).

One final key point Aristotle touches upon in *Politics* is the question of whether the virtue of a good man is identical with the virtue of the excellent citizen. He argues that the two can be mutually exclusive, because a good citizen is someone who follows the law of the government they live in and one can be a good citizen without possessing the excellence in character that makes someone a good person (Aristotle, 2011, p.192). However, we can make it so that it is required of every citizen that they must also be a good man (Ibid).

If this a component of politics, then determining what it means to be a good man, then that means we should be working to determine what virtuous qualities an individual should work to embody. This in turn, means that all superhero films are political on some level. While the events that take place in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films are set in outer space, and therefore far removed from any kind of political institutions that govern our world, they would still qualify as political because they showcase a group of individuals learning how to be selfless enough to risk their lives and protect a planet from destruction. The only way for superhero films not to

be political would for the filmmaker to ignore moral questions all together. This would not qualify as a virtuous act because they would be depriving people of a role model. It should still be noted that this does not mean that a film maker should be actively avoiding exploring issues relevant to our current political climate within superhero films. To do so would restrict our capacity to answer the question of what it means to be a good person. If we are actively trying to avoid exploring this question in detail to any extent, then this would once again be counterintuitive because you would be restricting your capacity to become virtuous.

### **SECTION 3**

If filmmakers developing superhero movies have a moral obligation to include political commentary within the narratives they craft, then we need to consider what qualifies as a valid form of political commentary within art. Up until this point we have not defined “political commentary” but we need to establish valid criteria for what makes a political film different from a propaganda film. How we establish this distinction will have a major impact on how we classify and criticize art, and the moral framework that we apply when analyzing it.

Consider, for example, the fact that historical dramas often introduce fictional elements when they portrayed and explore historical events. They may be trying to pass off certain elements of fiction as truth, even if the people who made the films were not doing so with a genuinely selfish or otherwise amoral intent. Sometimes these changes are made for the sake of creating a more concise narrative, or to help introduce larger thematic questions that the filmmaker is interested in exploring. Other times, we may not actually know what happened in real life and a filmmaker might simply be making an educated guess about the nature of

historical events. It doesn't seem reasonable to conclude that all historical drama films should be classified in the same category as, for example, a white supremacist recruitment film that perpetuates the narrative that slavery never happened in the United States. It's true that in both cases the filmmakers chose to incorporate fictional elements into the films they produced, but the filmmakers involved in both projects did so with the intention of advancing different objectives.

Throughout this thesis, I have been discussing the political elements included within the film *Black Panther* and *Superman IV the Quest for Peace*. Both films have central narratives that touch upon political issues. *Superman IV* wants to communicate that nuclear weapons are a danger to civilization, but while it tries to do so it never explores the issue in detail or provides a clear argument for how it should be resolved. Given this, an argument could be made that it qualifies as propaganda because its political message is fundamentally flawed. I will now consider the properties of propaganda and why I believe the virtues of the artist are what allow us to distinguish between propaganda and political commentary. Let's begin by exploring the concept of propaganda and establishing a definition for the term.

Warren Taylor attempts to define the term propaganda in his essay *What is Propaganda?* Taylor begins advancing the claim that we do not live in a world where various propagandas compete with one another to be accepted as fact. Just because someone is trying to gain support for a set of ideas or beliefs, or spread awareness of certain facts, does not mean that they are spreading propaganda (Taylor, 1942, p.555-557). Taylor defines propaganda as "A systematic scheme created by one person or a group in an effort to persuade people on insufficient grounds to believe what it wants them to believe or to act to its advantage (p.562)." From this definition we can determine that propaganda is part a larger agenda designed to manipulate individual actions and beliefs, and that it engages in this manipulation with no regard of truth. Propaganda

is therefore characterized by intention. Whether something qualifies as propaganda depends on whether it can be classified as deceitful.

A problem with Taylor's definition is that it is vague. He fails to define what he means by "insufficient grounds." Suppose a person organizes a concert to play music that they know will provoke an emotional response of sadness in audience members. In gathering an orchestra together, they arguably employed a systematic scheme to persuade people to act to their advantage, in this case making them sad. Adopting Taylor's definition would allow us to qualify this scenario as an act of propaganda.

In Sheryl Tuttle Ross's *Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and its Application to Art*, Ross voices similar ideas about the nature of propaganda. According to the criteria she establishes, something qualifies as propaganda if it is "an epistemically defective message used with the intention to persuade a socially significant group of people on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause (Ross, 2002, p.24)." The definition she provides is similar to Taylor's in that she recognizes that propaganda is characterized by manipulation, and that some aspect of truth is being outright ignored or compromised when it is created.

Unfortunately, just as Taylor neglects to give a clear definition of what qualifies as "sufficient grounds," Ross does not establish what she means by the term "epistemically defective." She notes things such as false statements, bad arguments, immoral and inapt metaphors, but acknowledges that the concept is vague (p.23). Her defense of this vagueness leaves something to be desired. She reiterates that her definition provides a framework for categorizing propaganda, and claims that if there are times when there might be conflicting opinions about whether something qualifies as propaganda, we can still choose to enter productive disagreements (p.27), but she does not offer a way of resolving those disagreements.

Regardless of these failings, I believe that Ross was on the right track when she tried to define propaganda in terms of the methodology by which propaganda perpetuates a message. I will use the term “epistemically defective” to refer to any situation in which the person crafting an argument is not acting in manner consistent with virtue responsibilism. As I already discussed, cultivating intellectual virtue within oneself is one of aspect that Aristotle advocates for within *Nichomachean Ethics*. One way in which Aristotle’s works have been interpreted is called virtue responsibilism. Virtue responsibilism is an approach to virtue epistemology that quantifies intellectual virtues as character traits such as open-mindedness, honesty, and thoroughness rather than as cognitive faculties such as memory (Baehr, n.d.).

By the criteria of virtue responsibilism, propaganda is not intellectually virtuous. When one is creating a work of propaganda they are closing themselves off to points of view that run counter to the one they are trying to advance, meaning that they are not being open minded. They are also ignoring the truth when they construct the political narrative that they want to spread, thereby being deceitful and ignoring their responsibility to cultivate honesty within themselves.

I should make it clear that this would not empower individuals to classify different works as propaganda based on their assumptions about individual character. All human beings are moral actors that have a responsibility to cultivate similar virtuous character traits within themselves. This means that when we evaluate a narrative to determine whether is dishonest, we should recognize our moral obligation to cultivate intellectual virtues within ourselves such as open-mindedness. If someone tried to discredit an argument based on the perceived character of the person who proposed it rather than on the logic behind it they would not be behaving in a manner that is open/fair-minded or thorough.

I therefore define propaganda as a systematic scheme created by or on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause, in an effort to persuade people to believe what it wants them to believe or act to its advantage, without regard for intellectual virtue. Based on this definition, we can conclude that propaganda is inherently unethical because it employs deceitful techniques to further the selfish ends of those who desire power.

One point that should be clarified is that it does not matter whether the narratives employed in propaganda would potentially have wide scale benefits if society adopted the conclusions that were being advocated for. One such example can be found in Plato's *Republic*. In the dialogue, Plato uses the character of Socrates to argue that propaganda could be a useful tool for maintaining the stability of a society. This is illustrated in the chapter where he discusses a concept that he calls "the myth of the metals." The myth contends that all human beings are born out of the earth and that each of them has a certain amount of metal mixed within their souls. The metal that each person possesses in their soul thereby determines the role that they have within society. For example, those most suited to rule would be judged to have gold mixed within their soul. This myth would be taught to the subjects of the utopian city he describes, and would be used to help discourage people from giving in to corruption and selfishness (Plato, 1997, p.1050-1052). The narrative Socrates develops is false, but he believes that if people were taught to accept it as fact, then this would discourage every citizen from giving in to greedy and selfish impulses.

Whether a piece of art is being used to promote ideas or objectives that would lead to beneficial effects for society has no bearings on if it should be considered a work of propaganda. The result that propaganda is trying to achieve has no bearing on its overall ethical status.



Because it was created to advance a selfish and deceitful agenda, it is inherently not something that a truly virtuous person should try to create.

It is impossible to create a work of propaganda accidentally because what qualifies as propaganda ultimately depends upon intent. Just because an individual's reasoning may be unsound when they are trying to make an argument does not mean they are intentionally trying to distort the truth and convince others to adopt beliefs that they themselves recognize to be false. Provided the person who is making the film is obeying the moral code outlined by virtue ethics, and fulfilling their responsibility to cultivate moral and intellectual virtues in themselves, they will not run the risk of developing art that qualifies as propaganda.

It is true that filmmakers can try to incorporate political commentary into a film in a manner that is open minded, selfless, and still wind up coming to the wrong conclusions or make a mistake in their reasoning. Such is the nature of being human. However, even though striving to cultivate intellectual virtue means working to avoid making mistakes, a mistake in reasoning on the part of a film maker wouldn't render their work as subject to being classified as propaganda. What matters is how the film maker responds when they are confronted with the revelation that they made mistakes. The filmmaker can either choose to own up to their mistakes and make audiences aware of the flaws plaguing their work, or they can deny that they presented a false narrative when confronted with the truth. If they accept responsibility for their mistake and do not enter a state of denial once they have been proven to have been wrong, then their art will not become subject to being classified as propaganda. If they do not accept responsibility when confronted with the truth and try to discredit those who recognize that their work is flawed, then the film would be subject to being classified as propaganda. To truly embody the virtue of

honesty means being truthful about one's potential failings as an informational resource, and not ignoring them.

Still, it is important to recognize that there will be times when we risk mistaking a work of political commentary for one of propaganda. We are all human and capable of making mistakes when we assess a piece of art work. Sometimes authorial intent is not always clear or we lack complete information about the circumstances under which a piece of art was produced. We will inevitably need to have discussions about when certain grey areas develop and there will be times when we will have to make our best guess. Still this is not a problem provided we recognize them when they occur and work to construct arguments about whether they present biased narratives using the evidence we have available. It is easy for someone to dismiss a work of political commentary as propaganda specifically because it advances information with which they personally disagree. Defining propaganda in terms of whether it was the product of epistemic virtue means we must construct an argument for why the narrative of a given piece of work was not presented truthfully. My definition requires that we look at the methods of reasoning employed by the creator of a work to determine who they arrived at their conclusions, and examine the potential sources of bias that they might have possessed.

Consider again *Superman: IV the Quest for Peace*. As I discussed in section one, the film advocates for the importance of eliminating nuclear weapons, but it fails to explore the issue in any kind of real detail. It is more focused on trying to convince audience that nuclear weapons are dangerous than it is trying to deconstruct the complexities of the nuclear arms race. The fact that *Superman IV* doesn't attempt to explore the larger complexities of international politics that characterized the world of the late 1980's is a flaw of the film but we have to consider it in relation to other factors. For example, did restrictions in budget lead to the film losing critical

scenes that would have explored the larger complexities of the nuclear arms race? The answers to these types of questions will determine whether we can classify the film as propaganda.

Keeping in mind the established criteria for what qualifies as propaganda, we need to define the term political commentary in such a way that it becomes distinct from propaganda. Again, it is a matter of intention. While propaganda is clearly a product of vices, there is an argument to be made that the act of creating political commentary in art is inherently virtuous. When a person commits to the act of introducing political commentary into their art, they are doing so as a direct product of their own personal virtuous character traits. If one is not open to listening to points of view that run in contrast to their own, then they will never be able to learn anything and will remain ignorant. This is where qualities such as open mindedness become important. Creating art that is designed to serve as some form of political commentary offers individuals a chance to cultivate these virtues within themselves whereas propaganda does not.

Honesty is another relevant virtue. Unlike propaganda art, political art is not made with deceitful intent. Any filmmaker dedicated to cultivating virtuous character within themselves will be careful not to try misrepresenting one side of a political issue because doing so would be dishonest. If political commentary is to be considered morally and intellectually superior to propaganda then the best way to define political commentary is as any attempt made by an individual to analyze, describe or respond to any type of political individual, group or cause to the best of their moral and intellectual ability.

We have now established that political commentary is opposed to propaganda. The difference between the two stems from a matter of intent. Political commentary stems from the virtuous character that the artist is striving cultivate within themselves, and their capacity to put virtues into practice within their work. To create a work of propaganda is to reject the very

principles that define virtue ethics. Because artists are still subject to the moral obligations of all human beings who practice virtue ethics and must strive to cultivate virtuous traits within themselves, any artist striving to embody virtuous traits within themselves will not accidentally create a work of propaganda because they would have to make the intentional decision to give in to their personal vices.

Even if the conclusion that an artist comes to within their work is somehow wrong, that does not mean they have created a work of propaganda. They have simply voiced their beliefs and opinions on a subject matter to the best of their ability. All human beings can commit errors in their reasoning, and so long as they retract and alter their arguments when they are proven to be false then they are not engaging in propaganda. What matters is whether someone intentionally tries to pass off a false conclusion as the truth, to advance a specific political agenda.

#### **CHAPTER 4**

In his essay “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes argues that we should not concern ourselves with the author’s identity when trying to extract meanings from a text. This includes ignoring whatever claims the author might have made about their original intent while crafting their work. In Barthes’ view, a reader’s evaluation of a piece of work must be completely independent from the work’s original creator. In his words, “Writing is the neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing (Barthes, 1977, p.386).” Any kind of meaning we can infer from a work is a product of the text itself and not the person who made it. In the end, a reader

should ultimately be allowed to examine a text and come to their own conclusions about its meaning.

If one agrees with Barthes, then that means every argument I have made about arts capacity to inspire moral reflection in others is fundamentally flawed. Any attempt on the part of filmmakers to include political commentary can be justifiably ignored by audiences. A reader would be free and obligated to extract their own political messages from the film as they see fit. For example, suppose two people watched *Black Panther*, and one comes to believe that the film was somehow pro-monarchy simply because Wakanda is ruled by a king, while another believes the film is not endorsing monarchies. If we ignore authorial intent, then that means we should treat both views as equally valid interpretations of the film.

I reject Barthes' claim because it would affect our capacity to distinguish between a piece of propaganda artwork, and a piece of art that incorporates political commentary. In the prior section I defined propaganda as a systematic scheme created by a person or a group, in an effort to persuade people to believe what it wants them to believe or act to its advantage, without regard for epistemic virtue. I established that someone employs epistemically defective means when they ignore their intellectual virtues. Propagandist art is rendered distinguishable from other art based on the intent of the artist creating it and whether they tried to cultivate moral and intellectual virtues when crafting their work. This is where I believe there is the most sufficient ground for rejecting Barthes' claims. If we are supposed to ignore authorial intent when judging a work of art, then we lose any means of distinguishing between works of art that were intended to serve as political commentary, and works that were created specifically to serve as propaganda. Any individual will be empowered to classify works of art as "propaganda" or "commentary" based on their own personal biases or beliefs. This concern connects directly back

to one of the key arguments offered against Barthes: i.e., that adopting it could encourage relativistic interpretation of text. In other words, if we dismiss the importance of authorial intent altogether, then we are concluding that all designations of artwork as propaganda are equally valid. The idea that authorial intent is the only standard by which we can assess the validity of different interpretations of an artistic text is proposed by E.D. Hirsch, who warns about the dangers of relativism and advocates for the idea that authors have the capacity to establish the meanings of the texts they create.

Hirsch's argument draws a distinction between the meaning of a text and its significance. For Hirsch, meaning is what is represented by the text. By contrast, the term "significance" refers to a relationship between "that meaning and a person, conception, situation, or anything imaginable (Hirsch, 1967, p.394)." While he acknowledges that authors have later recanted explanations they have provided about the intended meaning of a work they created, Hirsch does not believe that this indicates that the meaning of the text has changed. If for some reason the meaning had changed, then the author would never feel a need to retract their previous comments about the work they produced (ibid).

Meaning exists outside of the words within a text. The words of a text are only symbolic representations for the author's original meaning and that meaning is fixed. It cannot be changed, it can only be clarified. Just because a person draws an interpretation upon reading a passage of text does not mean that it is truly accurate, or valid (p.396). Even if an author later claims that a passage of text means something different from what they originally intended it is simply because they view that original text within a new context. An author may have changed their mind about the meaning that they wanted to convey when they created the text originally, but for

them to recognize that they wanted to change their meaning, the text must have had a fixed meaning to begin with (p.394-395).

Hirsch does not deny that there are multiple meanings that one can construe from a piece of text, but he is also critical of the view that constructing the meaning of a text is a public affair. He writes, “Validity of interpretation is not the same as inventiveness of interpretation. Validity implies the correspondence of an interpretation to a meaning which is represented by the text... (p.396).” Just because there are multiple ways one can interpret a text, this does not mean that all interpretations that readers extract are equally valid. Using public consensus as the standard by which to determine whether an interpretation is valid is impossible because it’s impossible for the public to form a consensus on anything. There will always be those who disagree, and we don’t have any standard for deciding whose interpretations should be as more accurate than others (p.397-398). If a text is left to stand for itself, then it cannot mean anything (p.398).

It is true that we can never know another person’s meaning with absolute certainty, but just because we may not always be able to piece together true the true intent of an artist, this does not mean we have the right to ignore intent (p.400). Genuine certainty in our interpretations is rarely possible, but we can still reach well-reasoned conclusions about what an author’s original intent was most likely to be. Authors are concerned with verbal meaning when creating text, best defined as meanings that can be conveyed to others through the words employed. (ibid) While it has been proposed that there are circumstances in which verbal meanings are never accessible, meaning that communication would not even be occurring, human experience suggests that this claim is unlikely (p.401). Overall, unless we reject the view that communication of verbal meaning is possible, authorial intent is not to be classified as inaccessible.

In the final section of his essay, Hirsh acknowledges that there are some circumstances in which an author may not be conscious of the meaning they are trying to convey, but he does not believe that this indicates authors never know what they are saying in a passage of text. This is because an author is not always conscious of what they are saying when they create a text, just as any human is not always conscious of what they are doing (p.403). When people interpret a text, they can help identify unconscious meanings, but only when they are considering the distinction between the meaning a text has and its subject matter. When they fail to recognize this distinction, they come to apply meanings to the text that were different from those that the author consciously intended (p.402).

Stanley Fish offers a counter argument to Hirsh's claims. Fish builds his argument around a scenario in which a former student of his asked a one of his colleagues the question "Is there a text in this class (Fish, 1980, p.446)?" The professor assumed that the student was asking about whether there was an assigned reading for the course is teaching. However, after he responded to her, the student clarified, in her own words, "No, I mean in this class do we believe in poems and things or is it just us (ibid)?" Fish uses the interaction between the professor and the student to advance the claim that statements can be properly understood in multiple different ways within any single situation. This means no text can have a single correct interpretation, and that the artist does not hold authority over their work. The meaning of a spoken statement is determined in relation to the situation in which it occurs, and the number of meanings the student's question "Is there a Text in this Class?" could convey were conditioned by the circumstances in which she asked the question.

The social norms that inform how we employ language allows us to rank potential meanings by which are most likely, and then assign meaning accordingly. When the student



clarified that she was asking about whether we “believe in poems and things (p.446)” she shifted the context of the interaction she was having with the professor, and thereby changed the meaning of her question. This is the key area in which he disagrees with Hirsh, because Hirsh’s argument is built upon the foundation that there is a meaning independent of the context in which they are spoken. In Hirsch’s view, the meanings of word sequences are products of human consciousness (Hirsch, 1967, p.392). For Fish, the meanings of word sequences depends entirely on how they are perceived in accordance with social norms (Fish, 1980, p.455). Norms guide our understanding of language and as we familiarize ourselves with them overtime we get better at understanding meaning.

Fish does not believe that ascribing to the view he is proposing means that we would be endorsing the practice of relativism, as Hirsch cautions of. He believes that relativism is a position that is impossible to occupy, arguing that every person who interacts with a text will develop an understanding of it directed by their personal paradigm (p.456). Fish writes,

“No one can be a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative for him than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold. To feat that in a world of indifferently authorized norms and values the individual is without basis for action is groundless because no one is indifferent to the norms and values that enable his consciousness (p.456).”

Fish’s claim that the number of meanings a statement can take on is constrained by circumstance is valid. Hirsch himself recognizes the fact that the same sequence of words can imply different meanings depending on context, and that there are a variety of ways people can interpret a passage of text (Hirsch, 1967, p.396). However, I believe that Fish simply fails to recognize the difference between meaning and accuracy of interpretation that Hirsh is describing. Just because one meaning is judged to be more likely to be correct for a given statement than another does not mean that it is correct. Imagine a scenario in which two men are walking

through a parking lot. One man glances to his left, stops, then says to the second man, “Look at that car!” The second man does his best to follow the first man’s gaze. He immediately notices a single car that is distinct from the others in that it has a cracked windshield while the other cars do not. The second man judges that this is most likely the car that the first man is referring to, but unbeknownst to him the first man is referring to a blue car in the same row as the car with the cracked windshield. He noticed the blue car and, finding it to be a particularly beautiful shade of blue, told the second man to look at it. The way that the second man interpreted the first man’s statement was plausible, but it was not accurate. For the second man’s interpretation to have been accurate there would have had to have been a correct correspondence between what was said and what was being understood.

Fish’s student clearly had one intended meaning and in mind. The professor interpreted what she said based on the information he had available to him. This interpretation was not correct and the professor only identified the statements true meaning by relying on information provided by the statements original speaker. The student didn’t simply reframe the context of the social interaction. All Fish has really shown is that it is possible for a speaker to assign multiple different meanings to a certain set of words, and that that we cannot always be certain of whether we have identified the correct meaning. The meaning of the student’s original question remained constant throughout the interaction she had with the professor. What change in the interaction was the way in which that question was significant to the professor. Hirsh acknowledges all these elements in his original essay.

Fish is also simply advancing a new variation of the “public consensus” argument that Hirsh already criticized. He doesn’t specify the social norms that inform our perceptions of language are and how they are created. There are circumstances in which we will inevitably

disagree on how what are the established social norms within a given scenario, and these norms are going to change overtime. When they do, we need a method for determining the new meanings that phrases take on. Without a consensus for meaning, there will be no real limitation regarding what meanings statements can have. If meaning of statements is governed by norms and these norms are undefined and in flux, then it would not impossible for communication to occur because interpretations cannot be specified.

Fish's views on relativism are also subject to criticism. It is true that one cannot distance themselves from their own views to the point where they consider all views about a subject to have an equal amount of authority as their own, but our individual beliefs about the nature of art cannot evolve if there is not established standard to judge whether they are accurate. Fish writes about how our norms and values are reclassified as opinions when our beliefs change (Fish, 1980, p.456). However, he doesn't describe how we are supposed to go about down grading interpretations of art when we cannot compare the personal values we hold to a measure of artistic validity. He also neglects to describe the process that allows us to rank one set of individual norms as superior to others within a given scenario. It seems that a danger of relativism is risking the loss of our capacity to evolve the larger discussion about art.

However, even if you believe that my criticisms of Fish's arguments are invalid and that there is no real need to worry about relativism, the issue of how we should distinguish political art form propaganda without relying on authorial intent remains unresolved. The social norms that Fish describes in his work can't provide us with any information on how to solve this issue because while they define our understanding of language they do not create the standards for truth. If we do not have a clear standard for classifying art as propaganda, then we risk allowing people the option to classify any work of art that they disagree with as a form of propaganda.

The clearest alternative for classifying art as propaganda would be based on how accurately it reflects reality, but this creates its own set of problems. First, things get tricky when it comes to evaluating fictional works such as superhero movies because characters portrayed in the film are fictional and the worlds often do not obey the same rules that govern the real world. No real human being can fly, and the metal Vibranium that Wakanda uses to build its weapons doesn't exist. Inevitably, the narrative that a filmmaker constructs in service of exploring a set of political themes will not be able to be considered true in the strictest sense. This would mean that superhero films like *Superman IV* or *Black Panther* now qualify as works of propaganda because they are not true in that both films reject elements of reality to craft their respective narratives. Scholars like Plato have gone so far as to claim that no piece of art can reflect complete truth because it is only an imitation of reality (Plato, 1997, p.1207).

The second factor we must consider is that very often, humans can be mistaken when it comes to what is true and how that truth is represented. But just because someone makes a mistake does not mean they are intentionally being dishonest in their work. Art is ultimately another way for human beings to communicate information to each other, although each medium has its specific advantages and disadvantages. Obviously, it is possible for an author to lie about their artistic intentions when they are asked about their work, but if we concern ourselves with an author's identity we can do research and identify patterns of behavior that will help us draw a well-reasoned conclusion about whether they were truly trying to distort the truth or if they just made a mistake in reasoning when evaluating a certain subject matter. Suppose a filmmaker developing a superhero movie decided to touch upon the topic of gun violence in the United States. While developing their film, they decide to include a statistic about the number of gun-related deaths in the United States they found while researching the subject. If that statistic was

later proven to be false it wouldn't be reasonable to retroactively classify the film as a work of propaganda simply because it now appears to have tried to distort the truth. Factoring in the author's identity when judging a text, such as their responses to inaccuracies identified in their work, allows us to recognize such mistakes for what they are.

This a clear case where the relativistic environment created by the act of rejecting authorial intent legitimately matters. If we allow anyone to categorize a work of art as propaganda or political commentary based on their own beliefs about what is "correct" and "incorrect" then we are giving them the authority to decide which elements of any given narrative were created to be deceitful and which ones are honest. We are allowing them to decide which narrative virtuous and which ones are not based upon their own personal biases. This becomes particularly important for artists looking to duplicate the virtuous qualities of other artists. The only way that we can teach artists what it means to cultivate virtuous traits within themselves through their creations is if we provide them with a strong criterion to help them identify art work that was not created with the purpose of spreading deceit.

If we do not reject Barthes' ideas, then we not only lose our criteria for determining the validity of interpretations of a text, but our criteria for recognizing art work that could be categorized as propaganda. Losing this criterion would give everyone equal authority over whether to classify the narratives in a work of art as sincere, or biased and misleading. If we truly value honesty and recognize the importance of truth, then we cannot completely afford to ignore the identity of the author when evaluating a work of art. Accepting the author as the primary authority on a piece of text may restrict the number of ways in which an audience can interpret an artistic text, but these limits are necessary for categorizing and critiquing works that were created to advance deceitful agendas. The interpretative communities that Fish describes cannot

provide a solution to this problem. An artist's identity plays a critical role in our capacity to critique texts and assess the validity of individual interpretations. Authors have authority over the meaning of the texts they create, and we must recognize the existence of that authority.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that incorporating political commentary into superhero films would be considered a natural extension of the obligation humans have to cultivate good character traits within themselves according to the theory of virtue ethics. To become virtuous one must have to be able to imagine a version of themselves that possess the correct moral habits, and must be in turn be able to imagine how to go about adopting them overtime. Looking to other individuals who are already moral, role models, is the best way for us to learn about how to cultivate the correct habits.

Superhero films feature characters that embody virtuous qualities such as bravery and selflessness, and they can embody these qualities just as effectively as a real person can. Arguably, they do a better job at embodying these traits than real human can ever hope to be because virtues have platonic forms. Platonic forms exist in the abstract, independently from our physical world, and when someone tries to duplicate them in our world they will always be corrupted. Because superheroes are fictional, they are also abstract concepts and therefore perfectly suited to embodying any virtuous behavior. A superhero can then help someone learn about what it means to be virtuous by acting as a role model to them. As such, when someone watches a superhero film they can engage in moral reflection and assess their own behavior in comparison to the behavior that is being portrayed onscreen.

As artists are human beings and therefore would be subject to virtue ethics to the same degree as anyone else, creating a superhero becomes a means of reflecting on what it means to be moral for the artist as well. Being a virtuous person means recognizing your own capacity to serve as a role model for others and why role models are important when it comes to promoting the well-being of others. Therefore, crafting a superhero film becomes a way for filmmakers to share their moral knowledge with others. If they kept the information to themselves this would be counterintuitive because it would constitute an act of selfishness and selfishness is a vice. Because superhero films also have the capacity to prompt moral reflection among audiences, the film makers are also acting as moral instructors because they are in a sense creating a series of thought experiments to help others reflect on the nature of morality.

Artists also have an obligation to fulfilling their own creative impulses because in doing so they are fulfilling their commitment to cultivating honesty. This virtue then becomes important when exploring political issues in film because if it is taken for granted, then any meaningful attempt to consider a political issue relevant to our world in the present will end in failure.

Art that includes political commentary is rendered distinct from propagandist art based on the intellectual virtue of the person, or persons who crafted it. More specifically, it depends upon whether they embody the intellectual virtues outlined by the theory of virtue responsibility. Provided that the filmmaker is striving to fulfill their obligation to cultivate virtues such as honesty and open mindedness when they are constructing a narrative about a political issue they will not create a work of propaganda. However, a filmmaker's work will be subject to classification as propaganda if they ignore these intellectual virtues. It also matters whether they try to make others aware of their potential biases as a source of information and whether they try

to correct any mistakes later identified in the films narrative after its completion. If they continue to ignore or distort the truth, then they are not behaving in any kind of intellectually virtuous manner. Propaganda is therefore best defined as a systematic scheme created by or on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause, in an effort to persuade people to believe what it wants them to believe or act to its advantage, without regard for intellectual virtue.

This is why it is important that we reject the theory of literary criticism that Barthes' proposes in *Death of the Author*. If we are supposed to ignore authorial intent when judging a text then we risk encouraging relativism when it comes to interpretations of the text. That is, we risk setting the precedent that all conclusions drawn about a text are equally valid, no matter how little evidence there might be to support one conclusion in comparison to another. This means that audiences will be left to their own devices when it comes to determining which works of art represent political issues truthfully and which ones do not.

The truth is, more filmmakers need to recognize the full extent of the moral obligations to cultivate virtue through art, and the unique dimension this obligation takes on when they develop films about superheroes. Politics and morality are irrevocably connected. If politics should be concerned with determining both what it means to be a good person and a good citizen then all superhero films then become political on some level because they explore what it means to be a virtuous person. To make a superhero film that is not political would mean to neglect showing a superhero interacting with any moral issue whatsoever. This would be unethical because it would constitute depriving other people of a role model, which is not a virtuous act. While this means that not every superhero film needs to touch upon political issues relevant to present day society, such as the way that *Black Panther* touches upon issues like isolationism, doing so would make



the protagonists of these films stronger role models for the public because it would help individuals consider what virtuous traits look like in all aspects of life.

As it stands very few of the filmmakers who have developed superhero films have endeavored to include political commentary relevant to the current state of the world. If these films can help us reflect on what it means to be a good person, then we should not be limiting the extend of our inquiry into such a topic in any capacity. The superhero genre shows no signs of declining in popularity within the foreseeable future. Regardless of how much longer the genre continues to be profitable for Hollywood before audiences suffer a change in interest, filmmakers eager to make a superhero movie in the future would be wise to draw inspiration from *Black Panther*.

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