

The Magic of Mysterio: *Spider-Man: Far from Home* and the Ethics of Visual Manipulation

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Spider-Man: Far from Home (“FFH”) features narrative themes germane to an age of social media and citizen journalism in which individual Internet users are able to create and curate content with relative ease. Accessibility of programs capable of manipulating visual data begs reexamination of Plato’s moral objection to imitation as a dissociation from truth. FFH builds narrative ground from which the subject of “illusion” – imitation or management of reality – may be philosophized by popular audiences.

This study is situated within the film philosophy tradition of popular culture studies (e.g., Frampton) which attends to ways that movies may act as fields of play through which filmgoers reason about ethics, morality, and praxis beyond the film. Specifically, the present work draws from hermeneutic traditions of understanding movie experiences (Baracco). The aim of this approach is to suggest ways of interpreting FFH that enrich viewers’ perspectives on creating and navigating [new] media in light of the film content. Findings from film philosophy research enhance popular culture studies by “examining film’s capacity to present, develop and analyse[sic] (new) philosophical concepts and ideas” (Baracco 7). Given that popular culture, as Bob Batchelor contended in the inaugural issue of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, is essentially “the connections that form between individuals and objects” (1) the film philosophy tradition follows this trajectory by excavating how the shared experience of encountering movies might inspire such connections.

Spider-Man, and characters within his lore, are particularly well suited to scholarly examinations of the way[s] pop culture might intimate concepts regarding mass media and visual communication insofar as Spidey narratives often feature

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explicit emphasis on vision-based technologies, like cameras. For example, both Dave Stanley and Demi Schänzel have noted the ways that Spider-Man's use of surveillance technology has been inherent to his stories and progressively expanded over time. The character started as a newspaper photographer in comics, but developed such that "Spider-Man within the Marvel Cinematic Universe [...] incorporate[s] the addition of technology and state surveillance as a key signifier that Peter Parker has fully grown into their role as a protective guardian" (Schänzel 254). This is especially clear in FFH when Spidey "inherits the rights to an artificial intelligence system [...] gaining access to a large arsenal of orbital weaponry and surveillance technology" (254). Cary Dale Adkinson has also expanded on how comic book iterations of the superhero have involved a preoccupation with visual media, which may be viewed as groundwork for later cinematic interpretations of Spider-Man that more directly grapple with issues of surveillance power and panopticon. The present study continues recent research inquiries into Spider-Man narratives and ethical uses of technology; however, rather than focusing on how Spidey stories operate to legitimize mass surveillance, this study focuses on how villains like Mysterio may serve to warn Spider-Man (and filmgoers) about the dangers of misusing vision-based technology.

The overall framework of this study, then, is to follow the traditional of film philosophy as a way of apprehending possible symbolic or otherwise analogous meanings that may be accessible to movie audiences. Spider-Man stories have historically offered a narrative ground from which to reason about [un]ethical uses of technology. FFH continues this trajectory by putting Spider-Man's application of visual media in contrast with that of the villain, Mysterio. To examine what perspective[s] the FFH film may enable about recent issues in visual media ethics, this article proceeds by summarizing FFH, providing social context for trends in Western discourses from which FFH emerges, offering a hermeneutic reading of the movie's content, and extrapolating implications.

Far from Home Summary

FFH provides the basic narrative ground from which the arguments in this essay develop. In the movie, superhuman teen, Peter Parker/Spider-Man, tries to take a break from superherodom amid his uncertainty about continuing as a hero following the death of his mentor, Tony Stark. This mentor was a wealthy industrialist turned superhero. There is a leadership void for the world's heroes after

Stark's death. During this vulnerable moment in the world of the movie, a global threat in the form of elemental monsters appears and, in the absence of other heroes, SHIELD's Nick Fury asks Peter to help defeat these creatures. As Peter frets over how to defeat the monsters, a new hero – the magical, otherworldly Mysterio – arrives on the scene and offers to help. Mysterio claims to be from an alternate universe that similar elemental creatures destroyed. His knowledge of the monsters makes him a strong ally for Peter and he begins to take over Stark's mentor role for the teen.

Stark bequeathed Peter with glasses that virtually link to enormous information databases and defense satellites. Peter struggles to understand Stark's meaning in giving him the glasses. After gaining Peter's trust through their allyship against the elementals, Mysterio persuades Peter to give him the glasses. Shortly thereafter, Peter comes to find that the elemental monsters were all illusions created by Mysterio's advanced holographic technology. With Stark's glasses now in hand, Mysterio could add very real dangers, such as weapons from Stark's arsenal, to his illusions. Peter tries and fails to defeat Mysterio after discovering his nefarious motives. He loses his initial fights with the villain because he is unable to determine when Mysterio is using holograms. He cannot tell what is real. A mutual friend of Peter and Tony arrives to comfort and support Peter. After receiving advice from his friend, Peter enters into a final conflict with Mysterio and learns to rely on his senses beyond sight to fight past Mysterio's illusions. He is ultimately able to incapacitate the villain.

The major thrust of the plot of FFH regards whether Peter can trust what he sees. This tension also exists in the world outside of cinema. Philosophers have long debated concerns surrounding imitation. The remainder of this essay is dedicated to contextualizing FFH as a contemporary attempt to contribute to this philosophical conversation in ways that are accessible to broad audiences.

Philosophy of Imitation

Most people who have spent time on social media have undoubtedly encountered some form of mis- or disinformation presented by visual means. Memes carry partial stories in their captions while appearing to confirm the inaccurate information via embedded imagery. Staged videos claiming to represent authentic, objective reality go viral. Many methods exist to execute deceit visually. An overview of common means of manipulation and a brief history of how scholars

have historically navigated associated dangers provide grounds from which to interpret FFH. This history is particularly valuable ground for studying FFH precisely because the major source of antagonism in the film is illusion and visual deceit.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a friend of the author sent a video purporting to show secret footage of a presentation made by Bill Gates to the CIA. During the presentation, the speaker (presumed to be Gates) reviewed research on vaccination against genes related to religious fundamentalism. The person who sent the video initially interpreted that Gates had been caught admitting that vaccine ingredients would be used to control people with religious convictions. This video has been debunked as a hoax or prank (Reuters). Gates never had any such meeting, nor is there any evidence of a U.S. government conspiracy to eliminate religiosity. Even though the contents of the video may be demonstrably staged, the footage was designed to appear authentic. Such media can be very convincing. People are not being stupidly duped by these videos; they simply do not have access to cues indicating that the content is staged. When a trusted friend present information that appears to correspond with reality, there is no immediate reason to fact-check. The danger of this kind of content is that humans have constructed a communicative epoch of visiocentrality and perspectivism, in which they tend to most believe what can be verified by sight (Gebser; Kramer et al.; Kramer. When members of a group are socialized to confirm what they hear with what they see, then what criteria of veracity exists when the mechanism for establishing truth (sight) is subject to fraud?

Jean Gebser described the problem in terms from a shift, or “mutation,” in cultural consciousness – social patterns in perceiving and reasoning – from confidence in talk/community to confidence in self-reflection (61-97). In other words, the transition is from relationships to individual perspective: we trust what we can see for ourselves. Gebser therefore designated the structure of social consciousness emphasizing faith through sight “mental” or, more commonly, “perspectival.” As an example, Ashley Hinck called the state of heightened perspectivity a “fluid world” marked by increased choice in affiliation (i.e., attending a personally desired school or church rather than following a family’s traditional selection), identity (i.e., choosing to join communities based on personal interest), and worldview (i.e., finding individual truths rather than relying solely on community or tradition) (22-6). Each of these qualities ground the locus of knowledge in the individual and the choices they both physically and metaphorically see in front of them. Eric M. Kramer, Gabriel Adkins, Sang Ho

Kim, and Greg Miller elaborated that perspectivity, as a way of thinking, inspires people to focus on different kinds of evidence in their reasoning. They posit that “with the advent of the modern perspective” – Gebser’s perspectival consciousness – “technology has come to represent the means by which people, objects, and works are judged” (Kramer et al, 279). Considering the role of technology, which can be curated to individual interests, industrialized societies have become “obsessed with the eye and its perceptual product of vision” such that searches for truth reduce “auditory data to unreliable hearsay and inflates visual data to unequivocal truth” (280). This tendency to trust visual data that has been personally consumed – rather evidences garnered from other senses or from trust in community stories – is what Kramer calls visiocentrism. That [post]Modernity has ushered in widespread perspectivism and visiocentrality means that the stakes of access to technology capable of manipulating imagery are high, given the extensive social reliance on visual cues for apprehending truth. Furthermore, the challenges of living in a perspectival world create the basic context for FFH. The tension of the movie derives from Peter’s uncertainty about the future and complications to his decision-making processes via Mysterio’s technological illusions.

Returning to the example of the Gates/CIA video: the person described in the story was not exceptional in their trust of faked imagery – manipulation of sight-based evidence is a common threat in the perspectival world. In fact, the tactic of using falsified photographs for political purposes has been a longstanding staple of modern propaganda (Jaubert). This mode of manipulation has become more mainstream in recent years, as demonstrated by popular TikTok channels featuring “deepfakes,” or phony but realistic media created by Artificial Intelligence. A relatively innocent example of deepfakes might include YouTuber DrFakenstein’s videos, such as a popular edit of the title sequence of the television show *Full House* featuring Nick Offerman’s face integrated over the faces of the original actors. The result is what appears to be an ad for *Full House* starring Nick Offerman even though no such show ever actually aired. There are, unfortunately, also darker applications of this faking, though. Bowman argued that mass media like TikTok “have raised new fears over the proliferation of believable deepfakes.” She noted the quick rate at which technology for deepfakes has advanced. New deepfakes are clearer and less glitchy than those from even just a year or two ago. Bowman expressed concern that “while [certain] videos have been made with tongue very much in cheek, there are more nefarious cases in which deepfakes have been used, including nonconsensual deepfake pornography.” White explained that deepfake

pornography has frequently been weaponized into revenge porn, such as the nonconsensual sharing of sexually explicit imagery. Deepfaking complicates revenge porn by giving Internet users simple ways to graft virtually any person's face onto photographic or videographic pornography, and potentially share the sexualized content without the consent of the person who has been edited into the imagery. In addition to their ability to mount personal attacks via pornography, the capabilities of these advanced manipulation technologies toward political ends are becoming progressively more disconcerting.

Phillip N. Howard observed that the rise of the internet has also produced new forms of "lie machines," defined as "the social and technical mechanisms for putting an untrue claim into the service of political ideology" (xi). These machines are particularly concerning in the present historical moment because "today's lie machines" are different than those of previous eras in "their low cost of production... great speed of dissemination over social media, and the expanding industry of marketing agencies to help place and amplify computational propaganda" (xvi). Howard offered the example of the 2014 Columbian Chemicals Plant explosion hoax in which lie machines produced video content faking an ISIS attack on U.S. industry. This hoax was convincing precisely because "images were doctored to appear to have come from CNN, falsified pages were placed on Wikipedia, and fake user accounts on multiple platforms spread the junk news" (xvi). The potency of the disinformation was fueled by the seemingly confirmatory imagery. Humankind is especially susceptible to this expression of disinformation because Modern, perspectival peoples eventually reduce "auditory data to unreliable hearsay and [inflate] visual data to unequivocal truth" (Kramer et al., 280).

Plato wrote about this very concern in his examination of ancient imitative arts. In *The Republic*, he articulated: "The fault of saying what is false" occurs "whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes – as when a painter paints a picture not having the shadow of a likeness to his subject" (Plato 2: 20). This lack of likeness to a subject means that an imitation can never be what is imitated. Plato elaborated with a following argument is that "no one man can imitate many things as well as he imitates a single one," and therefore one should only imitate what they know from their own experience – which, of course, is not really imitation at all (3: 28). Plato's contention is that imitative narrative is merely "disguise" and cannot fully represent the truth. His conclusion is that "the imitator is a long way off the truth, and can reproduce all things because he lightly

touches on a small part of them” (10: 35). For example, “A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artisan, though he knows nothing of their arts (10: 35). The creations of imitators have “an inferior degree of truth” because they are not the object or subject itself (10: 39). A painting of a chair is not something on which one can sit. For Plato, imitation presented dire concern because it could confuse an image with an object itself.

Baudrillard took up a similar argument in his writing on *Simulacra and Simulation*. His work has probed the ways that visual information is often simulacrum (from Latin *simul*, meaning resemblance or likeness). As with Plato’s argument, the image – the simulacrum – is not the thing itself. As painter René Magritte reminded audiences in *The Treachery of Images*, a picture of a pipe is not something a person can smoke. Resultantly, Jean Baudrillard argued “the imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by reality principle. Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model” (122). Put another way: audiences may learn from media (an amalgam of images, a cacophony of simulacra) what is “real” and then their criteria for what to accept as truth will be based on a simulation of reality. For instance, the manipulation of images and videos in support of political conspiracies is a long-standing rhetorical tactic. Jaubert’s *Making People Disappear* gives a detailed account of how photographic manipulation played a key role in the propaganda of authoritarian leaders such as Stalin, Mussolini, and Mao. He wrote that, “since we have been told repeatedly for 150 years that the camera ‘reproduces reality,’ there can be no question. We see hundreds of photographic images every day and they are as real to us as clouds” (9).

The Internet has created increased opportunity for individuals to create photographic fakes. Returning to the example of conspiracy theories: Thousands of Americans were led to believe that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was faked. A widely diffused YouTube video alleged that the parents of victims were “crisis actors” pretending to express grief (Kirkpatrick). The idea was that these hired actors would generate the appearance of a deadly shooting so that the U.S. federal government could win public support for tightening gun regulations. The faked video largely relied on circumstantial evidence concocted by social media content creators. This conspiracy was strongly perpetuated by conservative InfoWars host, Alex Jones (Williamson A1), indicating the potential role of mass media in spreading rumors by both auditory and visual means.

Trust in a video alleging a conspiracy surrounding the Sandy Hook shooting requires an almost paradoxical approach to consuming media. On the one hand,

conspiracists believed in a video drawing attention to supposed evidence that an event had been faked; on the other hand, these same conspiracists did not consider that the accusatory video had been faked. Visual evidence was no longer definitive because both the mainstream story of the shooting and the conspiratorial videos relied on imagery. The pre-existing schema, or “models” mentioned by Baudrillard, may account for the ways that similar types of evidence can be interpreted differently. In short, someone who is already in a frame of mind that is fearful of government regulation will be more likely to accept the rhetorical fantasies of others who support that cognitive frame. This conundrum is parsed and probed in FFH by means of the conflict between the honest and goodhearted Peter Parker and the deceptive illusionist, Mysterio.

Hermeneutics and the FFH Narrative: Perspectives on Ethics of Visual Media

FFH presents Peter Parker’s coming-of-age in terms of trust. This issue of trust is also a key to discussions on ethics and imitation because the risks associated with fake imagery regard potential damage to faith in others. The true-life hazards of visual manipulation are emplotted (Ricoeur) into FFH. Proceeding paragraphs present an interpretation of FFH, which elucidates perspectives on ethics of visual media enabled by the film. This interpretation, derived from a Ricoeurian reading technique to be described in the space below, is grounded in the social context highlighted in previous sections of this study; namely, that new media in a perspectival, visiocentric world present novel opportunities for trickery via visual manipulation.

Peter’s through-line plot in FFH regards a set of technologically advanced glasses, which house a computer system enabling Peter a sort of piercing “vision” into people’s text messages, emails, and so forth. Enhanced vision, the broadening of the hermeneutic horizon, also means seeing the world in terms of greater complexity (Gadamer). This tool of sight both strengthened Peter and increased his uncertainty. Mysterio was able to take advantage of this uncertainty and convince Peter to give him the glasses; however, Mysterio only intended to use the technology to dupe other people. Peter and Mysterio may therefore be compared and contrasted to highlight differences in ethics toward technology capable of changing perspective. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic concept of *figuration* structures the

following analysis as a method of understanding how some audiences might organizing experience with the movie.

Figuration describes the processes by which people make meaning of a phenomenon using both past experiences and future projections. In other words, Ricoeur argued that interpretation of the present moment (configuration) is mediated by reflection on how the past might bear on current circumstances (refiguration) and anticipation of future possibilities (prefiguration). Scholarship in philosophy of film has found Ricoeur's hermeneutics to be productive for apprehending perspectives on social issues presented through movies (e.g., Baracco). The present study deploys principles on figuration from Ricoeur's work regarding the value of narrative in human meaning-making processes. These principles, along with the context of prolific contemporary visual manipulation on the Internet, enable filmgoers to extrapolate perspectives on responding to the threat of visual fakery.

Prefiguration and Trust. FFH begins with an array of visual narrative cues to tap into audience's experiences with technology outside of the cinema, providing a framing for filmgoers to anticipate familiar aspects of the movie based on their knowledge of genre, tropes, and so forth. For example, FFH's first transition leads the audience into a purposefully "bad," home video style montage to fallen superheroes, such as Tony Stark, made by students at Peter's high school. This sequence contrasts with the impressive visual effects of the movie and reminds the audience of the fakeness that sometimes accompanies visual manipulation. The images that most people can individually render on personal technologies often come with obvious clues to editing, like clear-cut points or juxtaposition of realistic and non-realistic imagery. Even movies with impressive special effects can heighten audience's felt distance between truth and fiction. In this sense, humans can trust sight because mainstream filmmakers cannot discombobulate us. Peter shares the audience's faith in discerning truth because he inhabits a world where fakery is obvious. This trust extends beyond his belief that others are being veracious and into a general optimism. For example, when Avengers ally Nick Fury asks Peter to help fight a global threat, Peter says that Spider-Man is not needed because there are other capable superheroes – clearly indicating that Peter feels secure in the notion that powerful, honest, and good-hearted others can grant a sense of safety. This optimism extends to his trust in imagery, as is later conveyed through his naïve acceptance of Mysterio's initial illusions. Similarly, the cinematic

audience may be able to recall moments of experiencing faith in digital security – moments when fakes were obvious or friends combatted false information.

In the absence of other Avengers, Peter puts his faith in the new hero Mysterio. As it turns out, Mysterio is a nefarious ex-Stark special effects artist who is merely pretending to be a superhero to win Peter's trust. Mysterio's treachery is foreshadowed in several ways, including a sequence in which Peter wears a jester mask while fighting a villain alongside Mysterio. The mask signals that trickery is afoot, but also acts as a red herring by drawing attention to the wrong target (Spider-Man). Even the characters' costumes play with this notion: Peter hides his face but speaks honestly, while Mysterio reveals his face but has hidden motives. These instances play into the overall issue of ethics and visual manipulation by reminding the audience 1) that nefarious manipulators rely on the trust of others and therefore 2) people are not always direct about their motives. Just as Mysterio showed his face to Peter in an effort toward [feigned] transparency, audiences may have friends on social media or other virtual spaces who do not hide their identity but yet present suspect content (e.g., the Gates/CIA video). Even if the person who shares manipulated content is not doing so out of their own maliciousness, they yet extend the ill will of others (usually unethical content creators) by making their readers potential victims of the special effects.

When Mysterio's true intentions are finally discovered, Peter's betrayed trust leaves him in despair. He is defeated in a battle against Mysterio because he could not tell the difference between the villain's illusions and the "real" world. Peter breaks down in hopelessness until he is encouraged by a friend to face Mysterio again. FFH shows Peter's change from trust and optimism to uncertainty and despair. Similarly, the movie's audience may have experienced the frustration and seemingly hopelessness that comes with being deceived. Visual lies are especially disconcerting because most people are socialized with the idea that "seeing is believing."

The opening acts of FFH work to activate particular prefigured information – experience deemed germane by the filmgoer, such as familiarity with visual illusion – to heighten the movie's sense of resonance. Prefigures emerge from the symbolic repertoire of a person's experiences and constitute ground from which a story may be authenticated. To take an example from the movie: Peter first meets Mysterio in a secret base with Nick Fury. During this meeting, Mysterio established ethos by invoking well-known superhero mythology (i.e., sacrificial outsider with a tragic background). He was encountered at a secret headquarters, a setting where heroes

belong. He told a story that matches virtually every popular superhero origin, thereby drawing on experiences familiar to Peter. This experiential background prefigured the ways that Peter interpreted Mysterio's communication. When present narratives cohere with previous knowledge or experience (Fisher), then the prefigures encourage interpreters to inhabit the rhetorical world presented. An important metacommunication of FFH is that Peter is drawn into Mysterio's story by references to familiar tropes, which is incidentally also a major way that movies shape audience expectations. Importantly, and as discussed in prior sections of this study, this sort of narrative coherence and framing of expectations is also powerful tactic for gaining the trust necessary for later introducing successful fakery.

FFH provides imagery and dialogue to draw the audience's attention to specific prefigures. Particularly, the poorly edited video footage from Peter's friends, attention to internet myths among Peter's peers, and thinly veiled deceptions (e.g., the jester mask) each invoke feelings of security in the notion that we can tell the difference between what is real and fake. This backdrop prepares the audience to experience Peter's shift from trust and optimism to the despair that comes with media manipulation.

Refiguration and Skepticism. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics place refiguration as a third step in a recursive process of interpreting the world. Phase 2, configuration, is always situated between prefiguration (forward-looking narrative orientation) and refiguration (reflective orientation). In context of fiction, interpretative conclusions are often shaped by a refigurative posture after experiencing a whole work (Fisher, 158-79). As such, viewers of FFH will reap a more nuanced understanding of the movie's rhetorical arguments by considering both prefiguration and refiguration before honing on the emplotment itself (configuration). In the refiguration step, the interpreter reflects on the meaning of a text with knowledge of the whole. For instance, once audiences have finished watching FFH, they can look back and understand elements such as foreshadowing. Although someone might anticipate that a moment on screen was foreshadowing during their experience with the movie, they cannot know for sure until they see the shadow enacted in future parts of the work. In the case of FFH, the revelation of Mysterio's betrayal provides reflective resources for the audience.

In the refiguration phase, audiences learn they have been manipulated. Just like Peter and Mysterio, the audience knows that images can be made to appear realistic, even when they feature various degrees of falsification (Jaubert). These fakes can be very convincing, from still photos in politics (Jaubert) to online conspiracies

(Howard) and even cinematic manipulations. Found footage movies, for example, blur the line between fictional film and real-life home video (Hedash). Pranks on the part of filmmakers during and after the release of [fictional] found-footage movie *Blair Witch Project* maintained the movie's reputation as a true story until well over a year after its release. While certain hoaxes about movies may be all in good fun, other found footage style stories have had more dire consequences. For instance, two twelve-year-old girls repeatedly stabbed one of their friends to appease a fictional horror character, Slender Man, who the girls believed to be real (AP). Fortunately, experienced audiences are sometimes able to determine when they have been duped. The *Blair Witch* is not a true story. Slender Man is not waiting in the woods. The pessimistic outcome is that when people have been fooled by the visual machinations of others in the past, they become more skeptical of their sight.

The perspective of distrust for vision following victimization through trickery is also elucidated in FFH. Although Peter is able to defeat Mysterio in the end, he cannot escape visual lies as a fact of the world. Accordingly, Peter's skepticism for sight leads to Mysterio's demise. He uses his "Peter tingle" ("spider-sense" in other media), a sensitivity to environmental danger based on his touch-sense, to see through Mysterio's illusions. This skepticism is reinforced when the movie's final scene reveals that Mysterio made a video to propagate a conspiracy that Peter was the real villain in the conflict. Just like Peter, the audience cannot reflect on the story without remembering the illusions and feeling a heightened sense of deception from Mysterio. The world of FFH invites the audience to inhabit skepticism of media because – in both FFH and true-life – it is impossible to forget that convincing fakes persist in the world, and that even imagery can be ripped out of one context and transferred as its meaning is re-configured.

Configuration and Nihilism. The drama of FFH's plot is fueled by the fear that telling (visual, perspectival) truth from lies is hopeless. If so, everything is virtually meaningless because there is no basis from which to determine right action. This is the nightmare of a post-truth era. When trust is lost, communication breaks down and chaos ensues. Peter encounters this sense of nihilism: even though he can determine that Mysterio is a trickster, he is regularly yet unable to tell when he is being fooled by an illusion until the end of the film. The audience may experience Peter's journey in terms of their own virtual coming-of-age. Even though a person might know that imagery can be faked, they may still have difficulty understanding when media is being manipulated in certain situations. After all, it is exhausting to

feel constantly the need to keep up one's guard. As Alain Jaubert wrote, "the painstaking, anonymous work of the skilled craftsman" in imitation is "to avoid surprise entirely, to camouflage, to make the world even more coherent, more banal, to erase differences" (11). In the case of FFH, the prefigured skepticism of the audience is configured into a plot that draws its tension from the fear of nihilism. Peter, like the audience, dreads what he can see but does not understand – the mundane things which do not draw attention, but influence action.

Incidentally, Mysterio himself relies on a narrative configuration similar to that of the FFH plot in a meta-communicative moment of the movie. He praises one of his co-conspirators for helping him create a "totally ridiculous" story about himself being a hero (rather than a trickster). The power of Mysterio's story was that it fit what he believed everyone wanted to hear. He took his own audience's fears about world-threatening villains and transformed those apprehensions into hope from a [fake] hero. As such, he configured the information to supply himself as a false idol. This vengeful trick was played based on the complaint that the most qualified people to protect the world (i.e., technological whizzes like Mysterio himself) had been ignored because they did not wear a cape. Mysterio's argument was that belief in heroes was far too informed by visual cues, such as uniforms. Other people – everyday people – can be heroic. Unfortunately, Mysterio undercuts his own argument by hurting rather than helping his community. This betrayal authenticates the threat of nihilism by realizing the fear that heroes cannot necessarily be trusted.

Interpreting the Whole: A Return to Refiguration. FFH is configured to build drama based on the mediation between the audience's former experiences with media and their ability to reflect on the story in a way that demonstrates how Peter's optimism was betrayed. The emplotment brings the audience along on Peter's journey from trust, to nihilism and despair, to a cautious but potentially hopeful skepticism. Even though Peter can never go back and regain the trust that he lost during his encounter with Mysterio, his ability to defeat the villain with his spider-sense provided some hope that lies can be detected. Illusions have limits of plausibility. Similarly, the movie's audience may realize that media manipulations can be uncovered and understood. The downside of the present moment, the place where both Peter and the audience land at the end of their experience with lie machines, is that we must now be constantly vigilant to determine fact from fiction. This vigilance may grant glimmer of hope in the face of anomie, but it can also be exhausting; one challenge traded for another.

Perspectives on the Dangers of Illusion

There is an array of applications for visual manipulation technologies, from crafting false videos of supposed CIA briefings to creating beautifully elaborate fantasy films. Amid the many possible usages of such media, there are several potential dangers that are portrayed through various cinematic elements in FFH. The risks of imitation and illusion presented in FFH offer a field for theoretical play in which audiences may consider the ethical implications of wielding the “magic” of Mysterio. The following paragraphs extrapolate perspectives on visual manipulation in FFH enabled by the Ricoeurian reading of the film. While these perspectives do not necessarily offer to “solve” problems associated with visual manipulation, they hold the potential to increase awareness of both harmful illusions and the socio-cultural concerns undergirding anxieties regarding visual fakery.

Uncertainty. In their first encounter after Peter discovers Mysterio’s betrayal, the villain creates an illusory environment in which to battle his foe. Peter has great difficulty separating concrete objects from tricks of light. Mysterio taunts him, “I don’t think you know what’s real, Peter.” One of the incredible harms associated with Howard’s lie machines and other such digital falsifications that reverberates through the aforementioned FFH scene is that they supplant optimism with uncertainty. When people do not know what to believe, they lose motivation for engagement. Lack of certainty chills communication and social interaction (Berger and Calabrese). The result is a moroseness that yearns for a means of progressing from the stupor. This disorientation increases vulnerability to indoctrination. For instance, Hassan, a cult expert, described Trump’s rise to power in U.S. government as being built on the “promise [of] something that people want to believe in but that [the speaker] can never actually deliver” (xii). Trump led a powerful misinformation campaign with many such false promises, which gave people a sense direction during a time of political, social, and cultural uncertainty. This direction culminated in a mob, many wearing T-shirts advocating for Far-Right conspiracy theories (i.e., more virtual fakery), storming the U.S. capitol building based on the lie that Joe Biden had actually lost the 2020 presidential election.

The persistence of conspiracies, often propelled by fake online photos and videos, aligns with Baudrillard’s caution: “The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum [...] the more evident it becomes [...] how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance. In short, there is no

real” (107) In other words: people eliminate the real by creating thoroughly convincing fakes, at least in the sense that the fakes inform our beliefs and motivate our actions. To draw from an earlier example, there is no empirical evidence that the Sandy Hook shootings were faked. However, to those who believe that the government would go so far as to falsify a massacre to impose stricter gun regulations, it does not matter whether the conspiracy corresponds to fact. Their values inform them what view of reality to accept (Fisher), and then they act based on those beliefs (Baudrillard). Fiction becomes real. Any such manipulation that intentionally and dramatically increases uncertainty, and therefore vulnerability, must be considered unethical because it has the power to transform human actors into mere means to ends.

Personalization of Truth. The radical individualism of extreme perspectivism is conducive to an epistemic denial of all narratives outside of those generated by the Self. This theme has been threaded through years of *Spider-Man* media, as conveyed through Stanley’s discussion of the hero and “liquid” surveillance – that Peter only completes his self-appointed heroic duties through increasingly perspectival technologies from cameras and photography to A.I. powered armor (95, 101-2). Similarly, Baudrillard argued that the proliferation of information gathered through surveillance agencies (such Internet news, for modern readers), especially simulacra which can sparsely be distinguished from empirical objects, overwhelms those who are absorbing the information and essentially shuts down the social in an attempt to bolster the individual:

Information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but on the contrary, to total entropy. Thus, the media are producers not of socialization, but of exactly the opposite, of the implosion of the social (81)

When the truth is perceived as exclusively personal, then elitism and fragmentation follow. Baudrillard pointed out the irony that mass media, appealing to many, often contributes to fragmentation that strengthens the individual. When people feel that they have examined evidence and come to fair conclusions, even the evidence of simulacra, then they will prioritize their own conclusions and begin to reject counterevidence. Social sectorization (Gebser) means trusting the Self, and only the Self, to know the truth and to project personal paradigms on the world. Although there is no escaping the projection of our own perspective, there is a malleability accompanying collaborative social actors, which is, absent in radical perspectivism. FFH demonstrates this to the audience when Peter confronts Mysterio about the

villain's lies. The antagonist replies, "I control the truth! Mysterio is the truth!" [1:19:50]. His downfall and his menace do not lie in the fact that he has personal perspective, but that he presumes his own superiority and attempts to force his perspective on others. Outside of the movie, contemporary "illusionists" can fake visual data to encourage others to adopt a particular worldview by means of deceit. A potential lesson for consumers of virtual content is that self-trust may be warranted and valuable, but intellectual humility – a willingness to hear and consider perspectives beyond the personal – can strengthen the ability to flag lie machines. In FFH, Peter demonstrated this humility by inviting the help of his friends, honing his intuition by soliciting the perspectives/opinions of others, and therefore widening his available intellectual tools.

Cynicism and Nihilism. A final harm of visual manipulation represented in FFH, although there are undoubtedly more issues, which could be discussed, is that optic deception may shock entire social systems into cynicism. The utter hopelessness of uncertainty places people in a double bind between collapse into nihilism and blind acceptance of what Baudrillard called "models" – ideological structures provided by powerful Others. In the movie, Mysterio took advantage of people's willingness to accept models, saying, "You'll see, Peter. People need to believe. And nowadays, people will believe anything." Indeed, it can be so difficult to discern truth from lies that many people will simply believe whatever is both accessible and logically consistent with their preexisting value frameworks (Fisher). This is exactly the kind of persuasive tools have been historically deployed by cult leaders (e.g., Hassan). It is therefore no surprise that conspiracy theories have gained traction in recent years, following increased social sectorization and the proliferation of visual misinformation. Whereas these conspiratorial views were simply contributing to the rise of cynicism in the early days of the Internet, they now represent popular models for understanding. The problem of lie machines has perpetuated itself by first contributing to the confusing conditions under which people yearn for renewed certainty, then offering convincing deceptions as a strategy to escape the meaninglessness of those conditions.

Without models to guide us through visual data, there is a collective, nihilistic throwing of our hands in the air. We return to Pontius Pilate's retort to Jesus, "What is truth?" If it becomes exhaustingly labor-intensive to separate truth from lies, then many people will opt to simply accept the models presented to them. This perspective emerges in FFH via Peter's initial sense of helplessness after being

defeated by Mysterio. Were it not for his friends, like Happy Hogan, Peter may not have found the strength to keep fighting against the illusions of his nemesis.

Conclusion

Peter Parker walks the audience through the predicament of living in a time when visual cues are high intellectual currency but one cannot necessarily trust their eyes. His arc in FFH moves from innocent optimism, to experiencing counter-evidence (i.e., recognition of illusions which increases his uncertainty), to despair and hopelessness (i.e., inability to see through illusions), and finally to a place of perpetual skepticism. This skepticism is a tactic developed by necessity in response to being the victim of lies. Peter eventually defeats Mysterio by collaborating with others (humility, re-establishing trust) and utilizing all his senses (as opposed to exclusively sight). Despite his victory, Peter cannot return to his wide-eyed optimism predating the encounter with Mysterio. The audience faces a parallel juncture: even after restoration of the belief that lies can be detected; lasting damage to aith in others may result. This enduring skepticism is a rational reply to the proliferation of convincing fakes. Kramer et al. argued:

As any slight-of-hand artist knows, the eye is rather easily fooled. With current technologies of digital manipulation, faith in visual evidences – often counted as solid proof of a state of affairs (historical fact) – leaves the true believer in the precarious position of being utterly fooled. While moderns distrust hearsay, they tend to be gullible about what they see with their own eyes. (280)

Now that humans have begun to learn the extent of gullibility, they see things in a different way. In some respects, this creates strength by influencing a reliance on a wider array of senses. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the widespread cynicism now accompanying general distrust of vision will ever be undone. Humankind must live with the outcome of its irresponsibility.

The harms of visual manipulation only become more severe as deceptive imitations increase. Meaning that – aside from audience responsibilities toward skepticism and intellectual humility – virtual content creators can also begin to mend collective trust by endeavoring to mark their own manipulations as distinct from life beyond the Internet. They can also help others understand how to spot visual fakery. Of course, this advice is merely a general guiding principle given that there may be exceptional social situations that render imitation as harmless and/or

necessary. Enumerating these exceptions is a task for other works, as the goal of this essay is to simply communicate how FFH draws attention to potential harms of illusion and encourage technological wizards to address these harms with their peers.

In summary, the main argument of the present work is that FFH communicates mainstream anxieties regarding how virtual technologies may undercut trust in visual cues. FFH suggests through Peter's story arc that consumers of digital media may benefit from bringing a heightened skepticism to virtual information and increasing intellectual humility such that fact checking – whether formal comparison of varying information sources or informal openness to alternative opinions from trusted others – is a more common practice. As with much film allegory, the tactics used to combat visual fakery in FFH are only general correlates with life beyond the movie. Filmgoers must decide how to make personal meaning from the overarching perspective[s] enabled within FFH. Finally, in its villainous framing of virtual content creators via Mysterio, FFH also cautions those with advanced technological skills to avoid perpetuating lie machines, lest they generate the harms of illusion presented in the movie. These harms included exhaustion, nihilism, and elitism among other potentially dangerous elements of visual manipulation. FFH, therefore, operates as a way of expressing socio-cultural fears about imitation and illusion in addition to offering opportunities to reflect on how to navigate a digital world featuring mass consumption of digital media.

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