

THE SARTREAN STRUGGLE OF BANNER/HULK IN MARVEL'S CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Jason Butco Sams, Arizona State University

Abstract

Ang Lee's 2003 *Hulk* is gauged as the least favorable showing of Bruce Banner and the Incredible Hulk in Marvel's Cinematic Universe (MCU). Despite its criticisms, the film remains in the cinematic canon. The opportunity to retcon the content of Ang Lee's *Hulk* has been possible in any of the subsequent appearances of Banner/Hulk in MCU. However, this has never come to pass, which indicates that *Hulk* makes a significant contribution to the character.

Unlike the traditional comic book representation of Banner/Hulk, Ang Lee's offering does not establish the emergence of the Hulk as the result of the gamma radiation accident. Instead, an attentive analysis shows that the Hulk has been, from Banner's birth, a part of the unity of the character. The gamma accident in the film is just a catalyst that tears away any sort of divide between the two facets of Banner/Hulk. This duality can be understood through the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre develops two concepts within *Being and Nothingness* that ultimately drive the ontology of Banner and Hulk, *bad faith* and *authenticity*. Banner is the epitome of bad faith, or the denial of one's freedom in the face of the conditions of the world. Eric Bana's banal performance becomes

justifiable in this context. Hulk, on the other hand, represents the authentic within the character. These two concepts establish the philosophical ontology through which Banner/Hulk can be best understood; driving the development of Banner/Hulk through his subsequent appearances in the MCU. The distinction between Banner and Hulk, along these existential lines, begins to decay as the interpolations of these ontologies begin to affect one another in their continuing presence within the ever expanding MCU.

One of the criticisms that was directed towards Sartre's philosophical offering was that he underestimated the strength of the world to limit the freedom of the individual, particularly in the face of oppressive political and economic regimes. As the MCU expands, and increasingly powerful entities emerge as antagonists, it is the author's intent to use Banner/Hulk as a response to such a criticism. The power and strength of the Hulk may, at first, seem the key to such an argument. However, the events of *Thor: Ragnarok* represent the apex of the interpolation between Banner/Hulk, which can be predicted through the existential understanding established. A possible solution to Sartre's criticism and the continuing development of Banner/Hulk lies not with the Hulk, but in the rise of Banner.

MCU started in 2008 with the release of two films, *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, and has since transitioned to include a wide cast of characters from comics to cinema.¹ Prior to the establishment of this cinematic MCU continuity, Ang Lee's *Hulk* was released in 2003.² This film has always occupied a peculiar position in relation to the MCU films, even after the declaration by Kevin Feige, the president of Marvel Studios, in a 2014 interview that the film is excluded from Marvel cinematic canon.³ A complete chronological filmography of Banner and/or the Hulk in the MCU would be ordered as such: *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). The conclusion to *Infinity War* releases in 2019.

The Incredible Hulk, which is both a sequel to and a reboot of *Hulk*, establishes a dependence upon its prequel thereby causing *Hulk* to occupy a position in relation to the MCU in that it is both included and excluded. In part, this article is intended to be a defense of Ang Lee's *Hulk* in that its content is significant to the trajectory of Bruce Banner and Hulk in the MCU canon.

¹ *Iron Man*, directed by Jon Favreau (Marvel Studios, 2008), DVD (Paramount Pictures, 2008); *The Incredible Hulk*, directed by Louis Leterrier (Marvel Studios, 2008), DVD (Universal Pictures, 2008).

² *Hulk*, directed by Ang Lee (Marvel Enterprises, 2003), DVD (Universal Pictures, 2003).

³ Jim Vejvoda, "Marvel Studios Boss Kevin Feige Talks Captain America: The Winter Soldier Spoilers And What's in Store for the Marvel Cinematic Universe," *IGN*, 7 April 2014, accessed 23 April 2018, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/04/07/marvel-studios-boss-kevin-feige-talks-captain-america-the-winter-soldier-spoilers-and-whats-in-store-for-the-marvel-cinematic-universe>

Significance emerges through the application of an existential hermeneutic driven by concepts within the philosophical contributions of Jean-Paul Sartre. Resulting from this hermeneutical approach are parallels between *Hulk* and the MCU canon that can be used to understand the relationship between Banner and Hulk, predict character development, and potentially answer questions about the characters that are currently unanswered. Though the author appreciates both Sartre's philosophy and the MCU, there are comments that Sartre has made to which are difficult to reconcile with some of his most fundamental concepts. Using Banner and Hulk as a paradigm, the author also considers one of the most severe statements Sartre has made about violence, a sentiment that seemingly applies to the Banner/Hulk character.

Jean-Paul Sartre was an author, philosopher, and playwright contributing to the French existentialism philosophical tradition that arose after the Second World War. Although his body of work is significant, only a few of his concepts are necessary to create an interpretive model for the cinematic variations of Bruce Banner and Hulk.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces bad faith and freedom.⁴ These two concepts rest upon facticity and transcendence and the relationship between them. It is necessary to first clarify these terms as bad faith and freedom are both dependent upon them. Facticity is

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1992), 86-116, 800, 803.

everything that one brings into their situation.⁵ Facticity is the unchangeable elements of one's self and the world; all the aspects of the situation that presuppose that given moment: One's body, past, and the context of their situation. Representing the possibilities from that moment and situation is distinguished as transcendence. Simplified, facticity is everything that one brings into a given moment, and transcendence is what that same individual does with it. The relationship between facticity and transcendence is that both are synthetic of bad faith and freedom.

Bad faith, according to Sartre, is an intentional self-deception that comes about by denying one's transcendence, or in another variation, the deception that one has freedom over their own facticity.⁶ These examples can be taken as expressions that one situation determines the next, thus denying one's freedom in that antecedent situation. This amounts to a deterministic attitude about the given situation. The response is predetermined by one's facticity. The other being form of bad faith is that one has the freedom over their situation, in that specific situation confusing facticity for freedom. Take, for example, an individual who has experienced some trauma earlier in their life. This form of bad faith would be the equivalent of attempting to erase that trauma. It cannot be undone, but it need not define the individual or determine their actions from the point of trauma forward. Bad faith can be either a self-inflicted obstruction to the transcendental project of freedom, or a short circuit of this process

where the situation is perpetuated. To illustrate possible expressions, Sartre provides examples, one of which is applicable to the Banner/Hulk character. He imagines a young woman on a first date with a man.⁷ Over the course of the date, the suitor places his hand upon hers. This is something that requires a response, either in the affirmative or negative; instead, she does nothing. Rather than make a decision that will drive her towards the next moment, she is suspended in that situation with his hand touching hers, passing it by with idle conversation, refusing to acknowledge the events that demand a choice from her.

Freedom, which Sartre also calls authenticity, is the mediation in a situation where one maintains the possibilities that present themselves from that moment. In choosing a given action, the consequence of that action becomes a part of their facticity. The result of transcendence, due to the temporality of moments, is building upon one's facticity. For illustrative examples, think of freedom as skydiving where one's actions are potentially limitless: Maneuvers, ordinary freefall, and when to release the chute are all possibilities to the skydiver. They could go as far as completely abandoning their rig mid-air if that is the consequence they seek. Bad faith, in contrast, is like being tied to the front of a runaway locomotive, the locomotive being one's facticity. It pushes one ahead with no semblance of control or freedom, the tracks of the train already determining the next moment.

⁵ Ibid., 127-33, 802.

⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷ Ibid., 96-97.

Conceptually, Bruce Banner is the archetype of bad faith, in contrast to Hulk who represents the expression of freedom.

The first appearance of Bruce Banner within the canonical MCU is presented in *The Incredible Hulk*. He is a scientist who has the misfortune of being on the wrong end of a gamma radiation accident; an attempt to recover a super soldier serum thought lost during the Second World War. Consequently, he finds himself involuntarily transforming into a goliath green man with strength far beyond normal human capabilities whenever he becomes agitated to some outside stimulus. All this occurs within the first half of the opening credits; there is no dialogue, only a montage of short scenes intermingled between set pieces of scientific notes. This film, and going forward, consistently presents Banner as merely the vehicle for Hulk. Nothing is given about Banner other than his intellect towards the sciences and his relationship with Betty Ross, his love interest, and her father, Gen. Ross, who oversaw the project to recover the super soldier serum. The two relationships are plot points that are cast aside after the events of *The Incredible Hulk* and are absent in subsequent appearances.

The Incredible Hulk also places significant emphasis on the physiological emergence of the Hulk. Viewers are led to believe that an elevated heartrate is the trigger for a transformation. Stress, confrontation, and even sex are either depicted or implied to bring about the Hulk. Banner is also introvertedly centered upon his own problems. Curing his condition is much more significant to him than the welfare of others until he finally concludes

in the third act that he cannot be cured. Banner is consistently referring to Hulk as “the other guy,” as someone other than himself. He also denies himself certain choices because of the possibility of the expression of Hulk. This is easily identified as the self-denial of one’s transcendence due to their facticity. Betty Ross attempts to convince him that, as the Hulk, he recognized her, and she recognized Bruce beneath Hulk. Hulk even recognized and responded to the name Bruce, yet Banner still insists that Hulk is something other than himself.

Throughout the MCU films, transformation from Banner into Hulk is implied to be a result of anger, or a response to some outside threat. These scenes, however, can be interpreted in such a way that the anger experienced by Banner is not necessarily in response to others, but to himself. He increasingly finds himself in situations of his own making that deny his freedom. These moments of obstruction define Banner as his own self-denial. Hulk is a response to Banner’s own self-negation of freedom; it is a restoration of that which Banner denies himself. Dividing Banner and Hulk into conceptual halves of the same subject, freedom and its negation, seemingly runs against the representations within the MCU canon as its tendency is to view Banner and the Hulk as a dichotomy. Scenes depicting the transformation from Banner to Hulk should be approached with the question of “Why is he changing?” Every instance provides the possibility for an alternative interpretation: That Banner is angry with himself. *The Incredible Hulk* has multiple scenes where Banner has inevitably

trapped himself into a situation where he obstructs his freedom in that moment with Hulk emerging as a result. Scrutinizing the situations, they are all of Banner's making. *Marvel's The Avengers* has a similar moment when Banner creates the conditions of his bad faith. He agrees to help track down an alien artifact, placing himself in a situation that he knows is hostile: Facing a government agency that he does not trust. When the scenario goes awry, Banner's transformation to the Hulk effectively asks, "Why did I do this to myself?"

The Banner in Ang Lee's *Hulk* shares many similarities to the MCU Banner. What *Hulk* does, that no other film has done, is give a deeper story into the character of Bruce Banner, rather than just being a vehicle for Hulk. The origin story of the Hulk is still, consequently, a gamma experiment gone awry. The difference lies in that the experimentation is based on the gamma activation of medical nanobots that would be capable of healing injuries in significantly shorter periods of time than ever thought possible. Gen. Ross sees the military applications of this and applies the technology in a way that creates soldiers with higher capabilities for combat readiness. It would not be that far of a stretch to say Gen. Ross is creating "super soldiers."

Hulk's origin story in this film is an important difference from that depicted in *The Incredible Hulk* because it is one of the justifications that Fiege uses to support the exclusion of *Hulk* from the MCU.⁸ Despite the details, Hulk is a product of unintentional exposure to gamma radiation

⁸ Vejevoda.

with potential military applications. Through this perspective, the origin in *Hulk* and *The Incredible Hulk* are not incompatible even if presented differently. The product of the gamma accident needs a subject of which Hulk is a part. Ang Lee gives us this subject while the MCU tends to ignore the depth of the Banner character.

In *Hulk*, Bruce Banner is the genetically altered offspring of his father, David Banner. David Banner is the head scientist under Gen. Ross's attempt to develop a super soldier serum. Ross hesitates to allow human experimentation, leading David Banner to secretly administer the serum to himself, conceiving Bruce after having done so. Ang Lee's presentation is grounded in the psychological and ontological presence of Hulk. In contrast, *The Incredible Hulk* focuses on the physiological emergence of Hulk and, from *The Avengers* forward, the foundation of Banner in relation to the Hulk is largely ignored. Due to the nature of the genetic modification to which David Banner submitted himself, Hulk has always been present within Bruce Banner. In the first act of *Hulk*, on two separate occasions, young Bruce is shown to express traits of Hulk, both physically and emotionally.⁹ For Ang Lee, the gamma accident is not the origination of the Hulk; rather, it is what allows his manifestation. *Hulk* also presents Bruce Banner as an individual that carries psychological trauma from childhood. His father intended to kill Bruce because he understood what he had the potential to

⁹ *Hulk*, directed by Ang Lee (Marvel Studios, 2003) DVD (Universal Pictures 2003). At approximately the 6:10 mark, Bruce throws a temper tantrum and parts of his flesh change to green, which occurs again at 8:03.

become. His attempt was stopped by Bruce's mother who sacrificed herself to save the child. *Hulk* also provides an instance of Hulk manifesting when Banner is alone; there is no external threat as the MCU seems to suggest is necessary for a transformation. In the scene, he mentally revisits the trauma of his childhood, a helplessness that has carried forward into his adult life. In response, Hulk emerges and begins to destroy Banner's laboratory as it is symbolic of the very thing that has denied adult Banner his freedom. This scenario is also consistent with another example of bad faith that Sartre gives in *Being and Nothingness*:

Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer.¹⁰

For Sartre, bad faith can also come to be through the limitations for the sake of others. It is still a self-denial but, rather than choosing not to act on one's freedom, instead the individual does what is expected of them by others. Sartre adds, "society demands that he limit himself to his function."¹¹ The individual yielding to that demand is bad faith. This comes about in *Hulk* when it is revealed that Bruce and Betty's relationship has failed due to his emotional distance and commitment to his

vocation; hence, the sustained anger and destruction of the lab. It is symbolic of that by which Banner allows himself to be bound.

As Ang Lee's *Hulk* progresses, the limitation of Banner's traumatic childhood is also tested and inevitably broken by Hulk. Bruce is eventually captured and detained. He is reluctantly reunited with his father, David, while attached to a device that might have the capacity of killing Bruce should Hulk emerge. David spouts off on a tirade about his true son, Hulk, and that Bruce is just a flimsy veil of concealing consciousness.¹² Anger is Bruce's response, but unlike previous transformations, Hulk is slow to show himself. This is because Bruce sees truth in his father's statement: That Bruce is the limitation, the negation of his own transcendence, and that only he can free himself. The elapse in time from the point of anger to transformation seems to imply that something more is happening: Hulk is not stepping in as in previous confrontations. Instead, when Banner does transform, it seems as if it was his choice to do so. Choosing the transformation is a repeating element in *Hulk*. During the action sequence prior to the finale with Hulk and David Banner, Hulk finds himself in San Francisco after being chased through the California canyon country. As Betty Ross approaches him, Hulk recognizes her and reverts to Banner. Transitioning between Banner into Hulk, and then from Hulk into Banner, is important when viewed through the relationship of bad faith and authenticity.

Though the division of Banner and Hulk is definitive, it is not necessary that it be a

¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹² *Hulk*, 2:01:00.

limitation. Hulk, as the authentic subject, does not deny or attempt to change his facticity. If Hulk is Banner's authentic self, then choosing to become Banner is a choice; even if that choice potentially returns Banner to a position of bad faith. There is a therapeutic reconciliation in Hulk choosing to return to Banner, not just the subject but the consequences of being that subject. It suggests that Hulk is indicating that the relationship between the two need not be defined as it is; they are free to make it as they see fit. By giving himself over to Banner, Hulk is showing Bruce another way. The confrontation between Bruce and David implies that Bruce is asserting himself to do what Hulk has done for him previously.

In the closing moments of the film, Banner has fled California to South America. Viewers find him administering medical care to villagers in need when paramilitary members show up and begin demanding Banner's resources. They tell Banner that they are taking all of his supplies to which he responds, "You're making me angry. You wouldn't like me when I am angry." His eyes turn green and the camera quickly zooms out to an aerial shot. Only six seconds elapse from the time that Banner's eyes shift to when he is hidden by the jungle canopy and the roar of the Hulk is heard. There is little time for the struggle between Banner and Hulk that typically accompanies a transformation; Hulk is almost instantaneously present. When Banner states "when I am angry," it is authentic. Banner is Hulk and can make that choice for himself. He is an intelligent individual, so it would be surprising that he would be unaware of the possibilities for

confrontation that he could encounter in South America considering the pockets of political instability and the presence of military authoritarianism. This is due to Banner no longer having anything to fear because he is, if the need arises, Hulk. This lack of fear extends not only to himself, but also to any possible situation the world is capable presenting him.

Returning to the MCU canon, *Marvel's The Avengers* provides us with an authentic moment between Banner and Hulk, the first in the MCU filmography. When Banner reunites with the Avengers during the Battle of New York. The Avengers indicate they could use the Hulk's assistance and Banner replies by seamlessly transforming into Hulk. Until this point in the MCU canon, Hulk's emergence has been a struggle of Banner attempting to contain the transformation; the denial of one's transcendence. If Banner is the conceptual side of bad faith, then transforming into the Hulk, a choice Banner either denied or circumvented through circumstance, presents an authentic moment for himself. Voluntary transformation from Banner to Hulk indicates interpolation of authenticity in a moment where bad faith would typically reign. It is distinct from the previous cycles of Banner's bad faith collapsing upon him until Hulk violently erupts forth to break that obstructive state. Unlike Ang Lee's *Hulk*, the progress between Banner and Hulk is stalled in his next two appearances in MCU films.

A brief mid-credits teaser features Bruce Banner in *Iron Man 3*. The implication is that the entire film has been a narrative recollection of the events by Tony Stark to

Banner.¹³ When Stark enquires about the possibility of a psychoanalytic interpretation, Banner replies that he is not that kind of doctor, indicating that he nodded off very early into the events. This is illustrative of Sartre's waiter in that he has allowed himself to serve the function of another. In that same situation, he is also much like Sartre's young woman in that Banner's silence is perpetuating the moment of his own denial of freedom. Even though it is a brief scene, and may seem insignificant, it perfectly frames Banner as the epitome of bad faith.

Avengers: Age of Ultron also depicts Banner serving in the capacity of performing a function for others over his own freedom and conscience.¹⁴ This occurs first in the creation of the film's main antagonist, Ultron. The second moment is at the creation of an entity, Vision, that might help neutralize the threat that Ultron posed. In both instances, Banner serves at the direction of Stark, who is blinded by ambition. Additionally, Banner and Black Widow create a way to lull Hulk back into Banner, playing off Banner's awkward affection for her. This interrupts the pattern of Hulk emerging as freedom from the situation of Banner's making. Instead, Hulk becomes a tool for the Avengers team which is inconsistent with the freedom that Hulk represents. If Hulk is Banner's freedom, then Hulk chooses how that freedom plays itself out. Banner cannot consistently take on this responsibility. There is reluctance in Hulk's response to this technique. If Banner

can freely transform into Hulk, as is the case in *The Avengers*, then why would Banner not emerge from Hulk on his own? Why does Banner need someone else to do that which he chooses? It is as if Hulk's reluctance is not due to being "put away," but the manner in which this is accomplished. Banner is still unready to act upon that freedom. If he were ready, he could simply emerge from Hulk whenever he chooses, just as Bruce allowed Hulk to emerge in the finale of *The Avengers*. This tension between Banner and Hulk in *Age of Ultron*, which stems from the regression of Banner back toward bad faith, culminates at the end of this film. Hulk refuses to respond to hails to return to the Avengers, Black Widow in particular, and instead cuts communication with the team.

Hulk reappears in *Thor: Ragnarok* in a world where lost things converge. In his absence from Earth, he has become a gladiatorial champion. His fellow Avenger, Thor, later finds himself cast away on this planet. The two reunite and Thor pleads for Hulk to come with him to assist in protecting his home world, Asgard. When Hulk refuses, Thor takes it upon himself to find a way off the planet leading him to the craft that transported Hulk. When Hulk intercepts Thor's attempt to escape, the ship's recorder inadvertently plays back a message from Black Widow, a plea for Hulk to return to the Avengers from two years prior. At this point the violent emergence of Banner occurs with the Hulk struggling and failing to keep Banner at bay. Banner has again shown his capacity for authenticity. However, until the film's finale, Banner is reluctant to place himself in a situation that

¹³ *Iron Man 3*, directed by Shane Black, DVD (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2013).

¹⁴ *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, directed by Joss Whedon, DVD (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015).

might cause Hulk to emerge for fear of never again expressing himself as Banner.

The first question regarding Hulk that is left unanswered stems from a scene that occurs in *Age of Ultron*. Banner is on the receiving end of a mental assault by the Scarlet Witch that induces a strong hallucination. Audiences are presented with what the other Avengers, also afflicted by this power, experience under this effect. Banner's experience, however, is not. Hulk's response to the effect is a rage that causes significant structural damage ending after an extended fight with Iron Man to subdue Hulk. Consistent with the Sartrean hermeneutic, Banner experienced a vision where he was always the Hulk. Banner's bad faith would trigger a response from Hulk, but still being under the influence of the vision, Hulk would experience being trapped in Banner forever. This explanation would justify the level of aggression by Hulk while under the effect, as well as that the theme common to the other Avengers' vision, which is that of helplessness. These events also would affirm why Hulk would take control and prevent Banner from emerging in the span between *Age of Ultron* and *Ragnarok*. For as much as Hulk kept Banner subordinate, there is an element of Banner not wanting to reemerge, as if Banner has admitted to himself that he cannot be as Hulk can, so he allows Hulk to be dominant.

Even with Hulk acting as a therapeutic mentor in restoring equilibrium between his freedom and bad faith, the process of doing so could just as likely contain the interpolation of Banner into Hulk. Ang Lee's *Hulk* is concise; it shows the origin of Banner/Hulk, their division, and eventually

unity. Remediation is not always so efficient; in fact, it can be downright messy. The MCU's Banner/Hulk illustrates just how messy it can be with Banner affecting Hulk so much that *Ragnarok* presents bad faith through Hulk. It is most noticeable when Banner's name is spoken to Hulk, a name that the Hulk once recognized as if it was his own in previous outings. Much like the Banner of *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers*, in *Ragnarok*, Banner becomes the "other guy" for Hulk. In these moments Hulk shows frustration not at being called Banner, but because he knows that he is in bad faith, in contrast to Banner who denies his own denial. This affirms that Banner must be the one to free himself from his own bad faith; Hulk cannot do this for him.

Avengers: Infinity War continues the dilemma of Banner maintaining the division between the two, despite sporadic moments of authenticity.¹⁵ In the beginning of the first act of *Avengers: Infinity War*, Hulk is soundly defeated by the Mad Titan Thanos, a powerful alien who is collecting artifacts that would give him the capacity to shape reality to his will. This is a situation which Hulk has never encountered. In Hulk's defeat, he is saved by being teleported back to Earth. Later, as Banner, he warns the Avengers of what is coming, and must band together with other heroes to fight off one of Thanos' elite fighters. However, Hulk refuses to respond to Banner's attempt to force a transformation. The third act gives another moment between Banner and Hulk when the heroes are preparing for Thanos'

¹⁵ *Avengers: Infinity War*, directed by Anthony and Joe Russo (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018.)

invasion of Earth to retrieve the final artifact. Hulk once again refuses to respond. Audiences and fans were left wondering, Why would Hulk not fight? Is it because Thanos defeated him easily? Or perhaps he was brooding like a child? Through the conceptual lens made possible by Sartre's concepts, the answer is clear. Hulk is forcing Banner to act on his transcendence rather than escaping into Hulk to do it for him. This is the fundamental motivation for Hulk refusing to emerge during the events of *Infinity War*. Withholding Hulk's emergence, Banner must play out the situation thereby forcing him to mediate his own transcendence rather than relying on Hulk to do so. Suiting up in a version of the Iron Man armor, Banner assists in the fighting. The rise of Banner and his authenticity is the reconciliatory step towards a unification of Banner/Hulk which should be forthcoming in the next Avengers film due in 2019.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre attempts to convey the ethical project of the responsibility for one's freedom while making the themes he presents in *Being and Nothingness* more palatable for non-academic consumption. From his ontological foundation, he attempts to show the ethical implications of such. For Sartre, man's existence precedes his essence.¹⁶ He first exists before he can make something of himself, the consequence of such an ontology is that in that freedom to create himself, he alone is responsible for his choices.¹⁷ Man being responsible for what

he makes of himself is a reoccurring division between Banner and Hulk. Banner, as being conceptually in bad faith, attempts to reject responsibility for his actions, particularly those taken as Hulk. On the other hand, Hulk seems to silently act out that responsibility. This is most evident in the post-rage recognition of the carnage that he caused while under the effects of the mind influence in *Age of Ultron*.

Close viewings of the films show that Hulk's response is either to leave or defend his interests and himself until the opportunity to break free from the oppressive situation presents itself. The patterns portrayed in *Hulk* and the MCU films suggest that, in response to the oppressor, total annihilation is not necessary. One does not need to destroy the other to restore their autonomy to create themselves as they see fit. This runs against a sentiment made by Sartre later in his works. In the introduction of Frantz Fanon's, *Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre writes that in response to colonialism, "to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time."¹⁸ Sartre means this to imply that the man being oppressed is also destroyed and therefore free to create himself as he fits, no longer under the influence of the oppressor. As much as Sartre's philosophy can be intriguing and empowering, encouraging a critical introspection of oneself, it begs the question: Is violence to the point of fatality,

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven, CT. Yale University Press, 2007), 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul, Preface to Frantz Fanon's "Wretched of the Earth," Marxist, Accessed April 30, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/1961/preface.htm>.

necessary? It is a question that can appropriately be applied to the cinematic representations of Banner/Hulk. Inevitably, when considering the freedom of the individual, there will come a situation in which that individual will be confronted by another who actively opposes, or outright denies, their freedom. Banner/Hulk consistently are placed in such situations. The application and exploration of Sartre's sentiment regarding violence to Banner/Hulk is slightly out of context, but it is still applicable towards the individual which grounded much of Sartre's early philosophy. The conclusion drawn from this attitude, as it is played out through Hulk, is intended only through this specific analysis and does not imply the same conclusion is beneficial to considering colonialism, as its effects are far more complex and systemic than the relationship of an individual to himself and his immediate situation.¹⁹

Through the existential concepts of bad faith and authenticity, then it becomes apparent that the oppressor himself is also oppressed. The man he oppresses is himself, as well as the other whom he oppresses. In maintaining that oppression over the other, the oppressor is also denying himself his own freedom to act otherwise. The role of the oppressor, the one who would inflict their rule upon another, is another way of viewing the villains or antagonists within the Hulk films. The same phenomenon within the oppressed exists as well. Not only is he oppressed by another, but by not revolting against that force, he oppresses himself

¹⁹ Colonialism, its effects, and considerations, are taken up through Marvel Studios' 2018 film, *Black Panther*.

through the denial of his freedom to liberate himself. This phenomenon captures the essence of Banner throughout the MCU as detailed above. From the perspective that the oppressed plays a hand in their own oppression, if this were the case, then Hulk would only emerge once in that act of liberating violence, never again allowing Banner to manifest. Banner, after all, is his oppression. It cannot be changed, but it does not necessarily have to limit their freedom. Scrutinizing this dynamic further, Sartre is potentially contradicting himself in the sense that he has already prescribe the attempt to change one's facticity as bad faith. An individual can never undo what has been done to him; no action can affect the immutable. The oppressed can come to regain their autonomy to create themselves after the shackles of oppression are cast off, but they can never recreate what is already created. Sartre's wording is questionable coming through his own, earlier philosophical work.

When conflict between the two, the oppressor and the oppressed, occurs, it does not necessitate total annihilation of the other, as Sartre seems to imply. This applies both as an external relationship between two parties, as well as the opposition of bad faith and authenticity within an individual. Hulk does not annihilate either Banner or his opponents. There is a quality of askesis, or self-discipline, in the Hulk's response to conflict: His own with Banner, as well as the world at large. He confronts the world, liberates himself from its conditions, seeks isolation, and returns to the world to be confronted once more. Cyclical patterns such as this might be viewed as futile. Yet,

with every return, there is a change in Banner, Hulk, or both that potentially leads to the dissolution of their conceptual split.

In relation to Hulk and his antagonists, his response, though violent, does not reach the severity that Sartre sees as necessary. Here, one must differentiate between human beings and fantastical beings. Hulk creates no human fatalities through his actions although some antagonists do destroy themselves upon Hulk, but this is not due to Hulk's actions. In the Avengers films, the volume of adversaries under the direction of the story's main antagonist all lack qualia for human beings: Hive-minded, cybernetic aliens, and androids. For Hulk, it is enough to liberate himself from his adversarial oppressors. In breaking free from the situation, he proves that he cannot be contained and thus the adversary is shown that they do not have the capacity to limit Hulk. The oppressor is negated through the liberation of Hulk, not annihilated.

It is this interpretation, using existentialism as a hermeneutical device supported by the depictions of Banner as self-denying and Hulk as the freedom, that illustrates the value of Ang Lee's *Hulk*. It contains the entirety of the origin of the characters from traumatic divorce to post-traumatic authenticity. In viewing the MCU canon through this lens, *Hulk* provides the perspective that can be used to predict the Banner/Hulk trajectory through the MCU films. Unanswered questions relating to Banner/Hulk are reconciled through Sartre's concepts and the foundation that *Hulk* provides. It is a significant film to the Banner/Hulk character despite its excluded state from the MCU. As a conclusion to

MCU's current story arc, the forthcoming Avengers film in 2019 should contain a unified Banner/Hulk. No longer encumbered by a conceptual division, Banner/Hulk will have completed their therapeutic remediation. How this character will be represented is yet to be determined but this authentic Banner, who is and refuses to deny himself as Hulk, has already been predicted in the final moments of Ang Lee's *Hulk*.

Bibliography

- Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Directed by Joss Whedon. DVD. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015.
- Avengers: Infinity War*. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018.
- Hulk*. Directed by Ang Lee. DVD. Universal Pictures, 2003.
- The Incredible Hulk*. Directed by Louis Leterrier. DVD. Universal Pictures, 2008.
- Iron Man 3*. Directed by Shane Black. DVD. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2013.
- Marvel's The Avengers*. Directed by Joss Whedon. DVD. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012.
- Thor: Ragnarok*. Directed by Taika Waititi. DVD. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. New York, NY. Washington Square Press, 1992.
- _____. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. New York, NY. Citadel Press, 1987.
- _____. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press, 2007.

_____. *Preface to Frantz Fanon's "Wretched of the Earth."* Marxist. Accessed April 30, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/1961/preface.htm>

Vejvoda, Jim. "Marvel Studios Boss Kevin Feige Talks Captain America: The Winter Soldier Spoilers And What's In Store For The Marvel

Cinematic Universe." IGN. 7 April 2014. Accessed 23 April 2018. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2014/04/07/marvel-studios-boss-kevin-feige-talks-captain-america-the-winter-soldier-spoilers-and-whats-in-store-for-the-marvel-cinematic-universe>