Representations of Facial Scars in Film

Isobel Yeap[1], Kersandra Begley[1], Aruna Wijewardena[1], John Vandervord[1]

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Why do this study?

- To better understand the stigmas and prejudices faced by patients with facial burns
- Need to consider the long-term psychological morbidity of burns
  - Ye (2002) surveyed patients with face and neck burns.
  - 60% were reluctant to leave their homes
  - 30% were concerned about being deserted by their spouses
- Inspired by Croley, Reese and Wagner's 2017 study in JAMA Dermatology "Dermatologic Features of Classic Movie Villains: The Face of Evil"

Method

- The top 100 highest grossing films were analysed for characters with facial scars
- For each character, the following traits were noted:
  – Hero/villain/ambiguous
  – Male/female
  – Scars covered/uncovered
 – Obvious/subtle scars
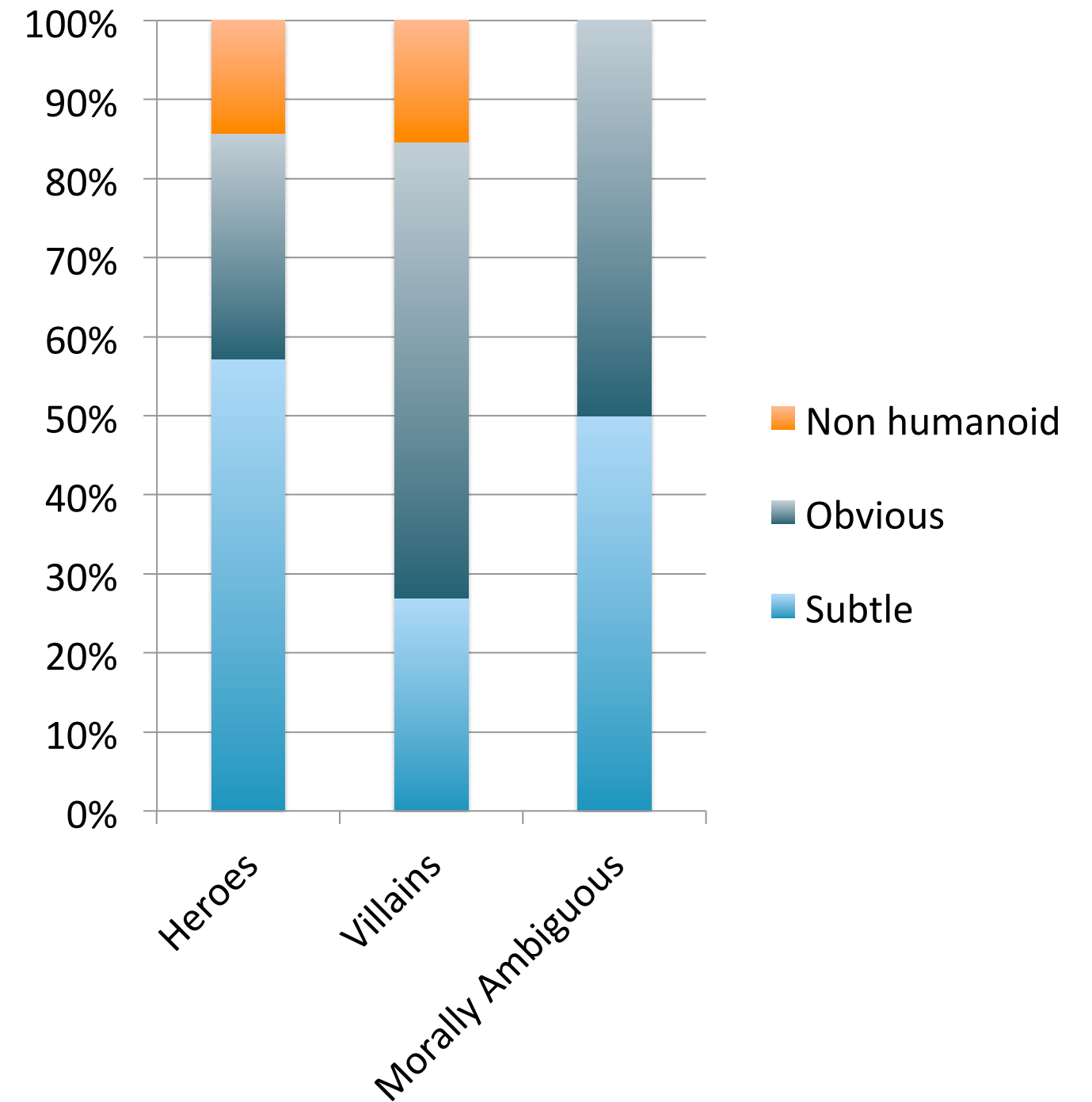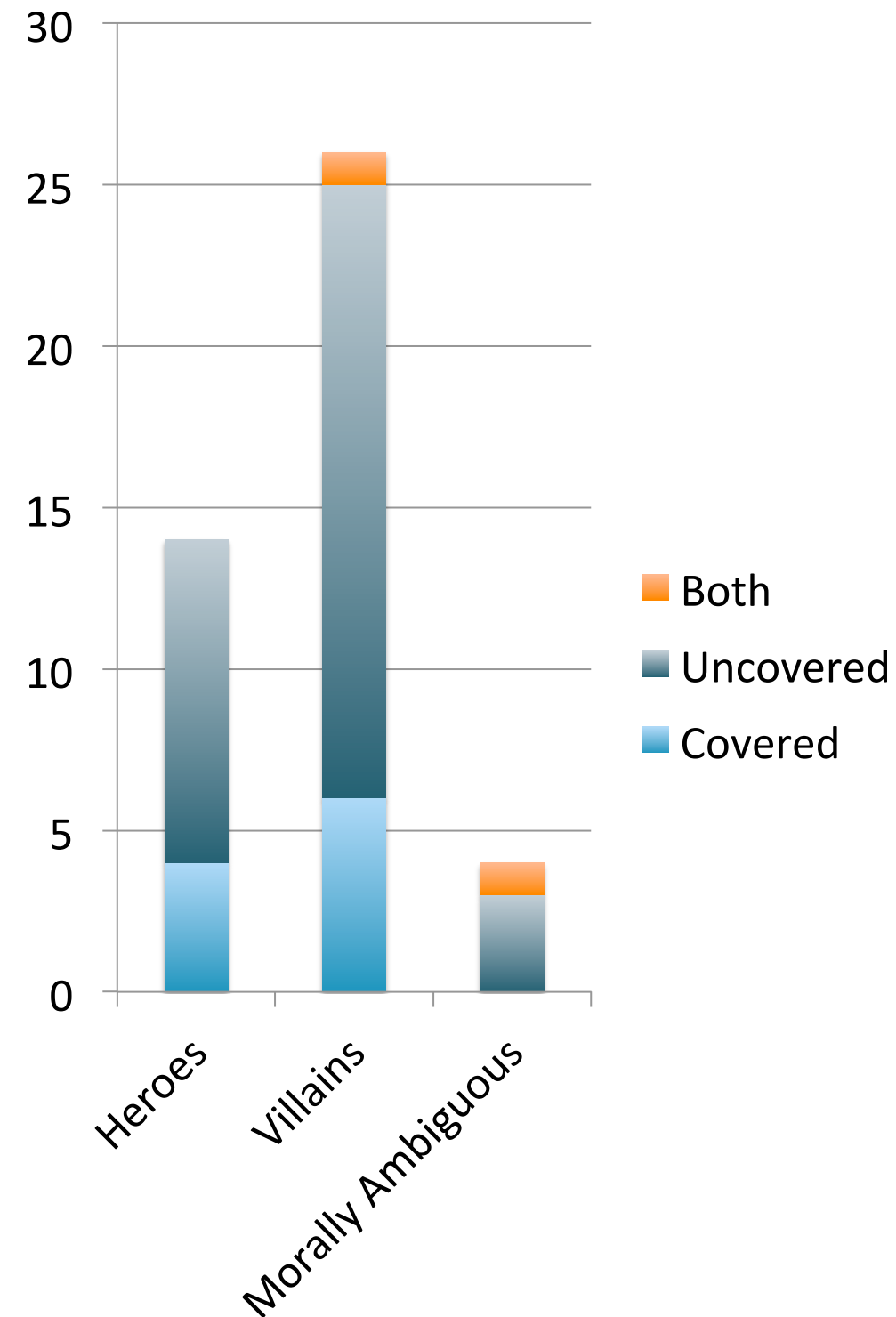
Results

- 50% (27/54) of the films included a character with facial scars
- These 27 films included 44 characters with facial scars in total
- The majority of characters with facial scars were male (93%, 41/44) and villains (59%; 26/44)
- Villains were more likely to have obvious scars (58%; 15/26) compared with heroes (29%; 4/14)
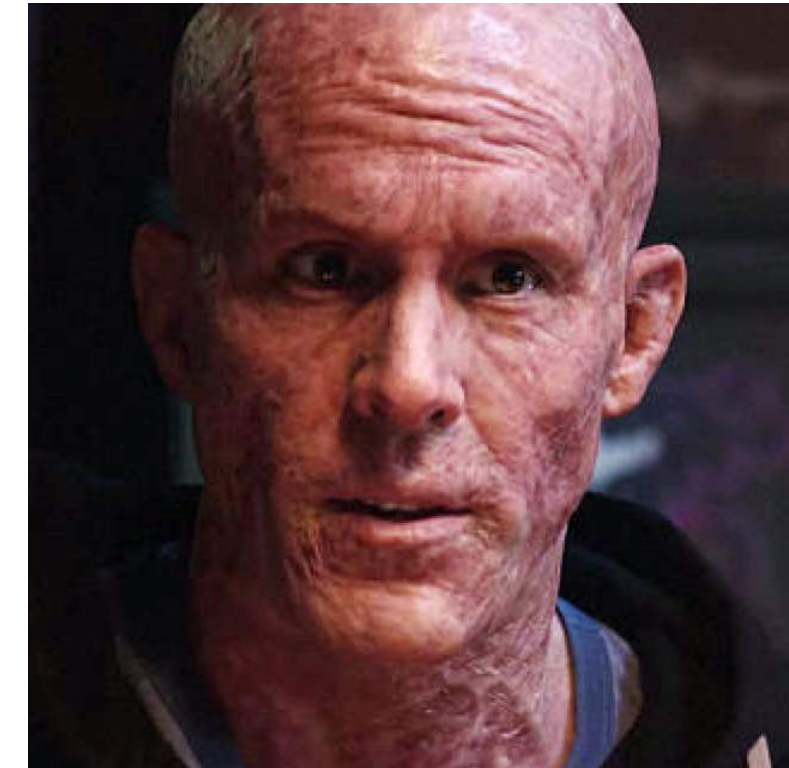
Conclusions

- The representation of facial scars in films likely contributes to the stigma faced by patients with facial disfigurement

- Facial scars are a common trope in film used to highlight dichotomy between good and evil

- What responsibility does art/the media have when it comes to the responsible representation of minorities?
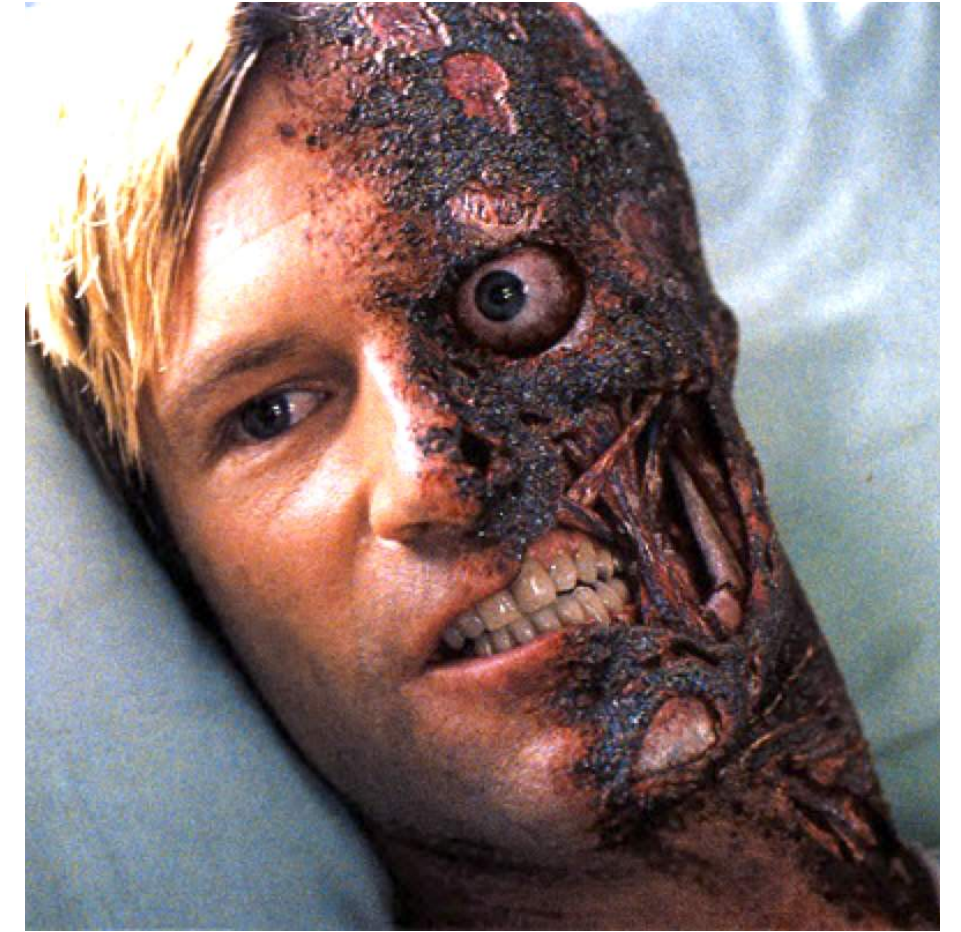
As for those whose faces happen to deviate from the norm, there was and is, a special irony with which they must contend. Their problems have their roots in the inextricable relationship of the face to the person and its role in human relations. Moreover, it is a situation made even worse in a society whose frenetic efforts to look young and beautiful makes looking different a social stigma—a stigma that has the potential for social and psychological death.[35]

References

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Image: Christiane Spangsberg
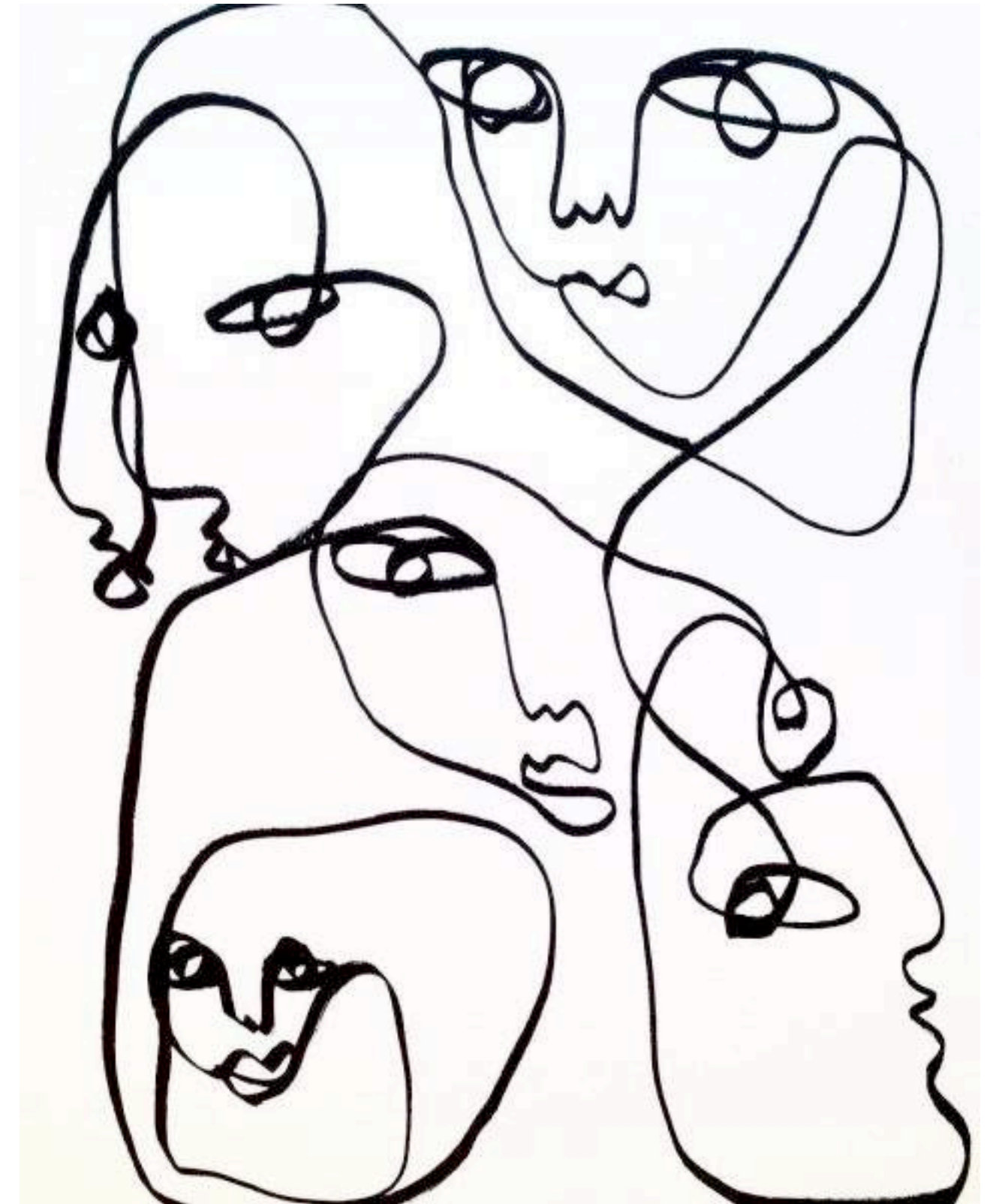
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1. Background

The villain with the scarred or disfigured face is a widespread trope in contemporary film. Often, facial scars serve as a visual metaphor for the hurt or damage that a character has been through, as well as a defining characteristic that marks the character as the villain.

2. Aim

To systematically collect and analyse data on the representation of facial scars in the most commonly watched films. The null hypothesis is that the representation of facial scars in film will be a negative one.

3. Method

Data were collected from the 100 worldwide highest grossing films including the number of characters with facial scars, their sex, whether they were heroes, villains or morally ambiguous characters and whether or not their scars were covered.

4. Results
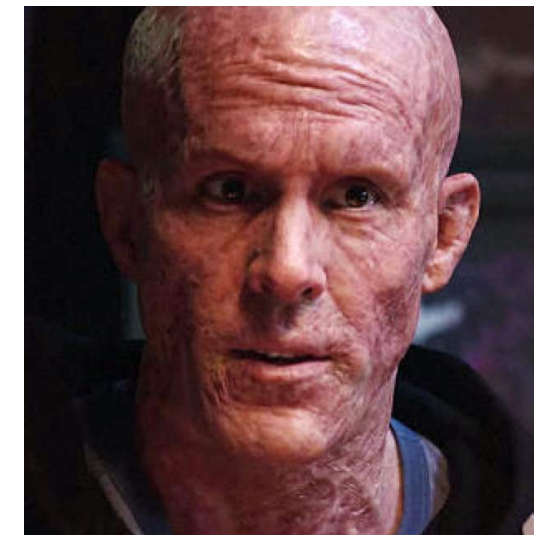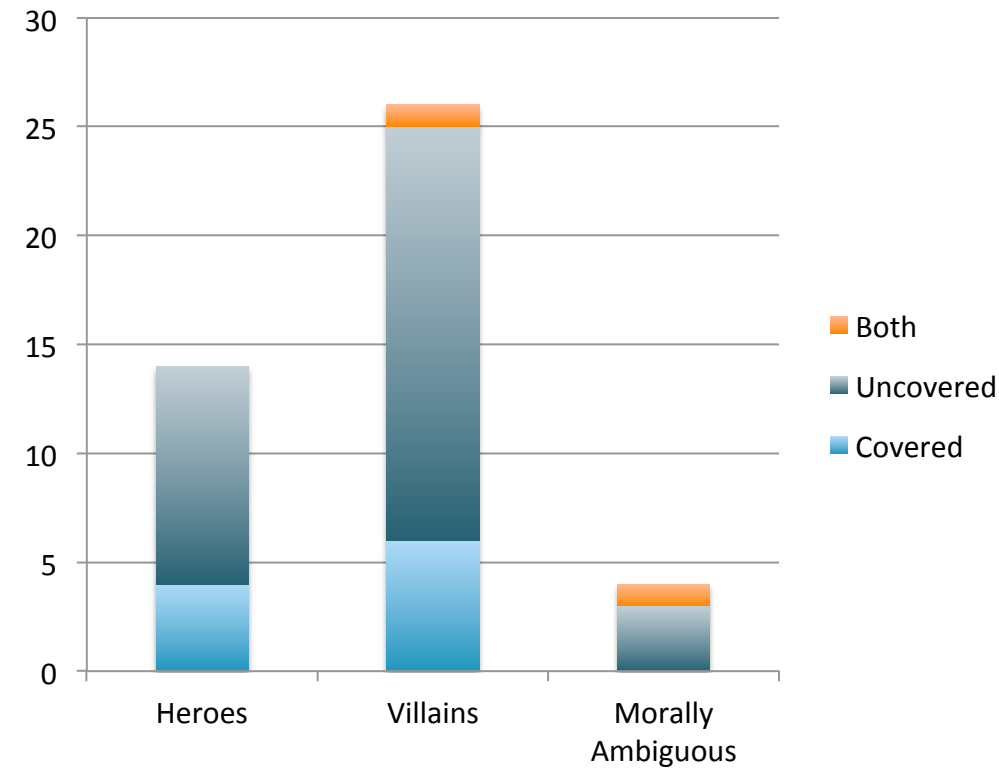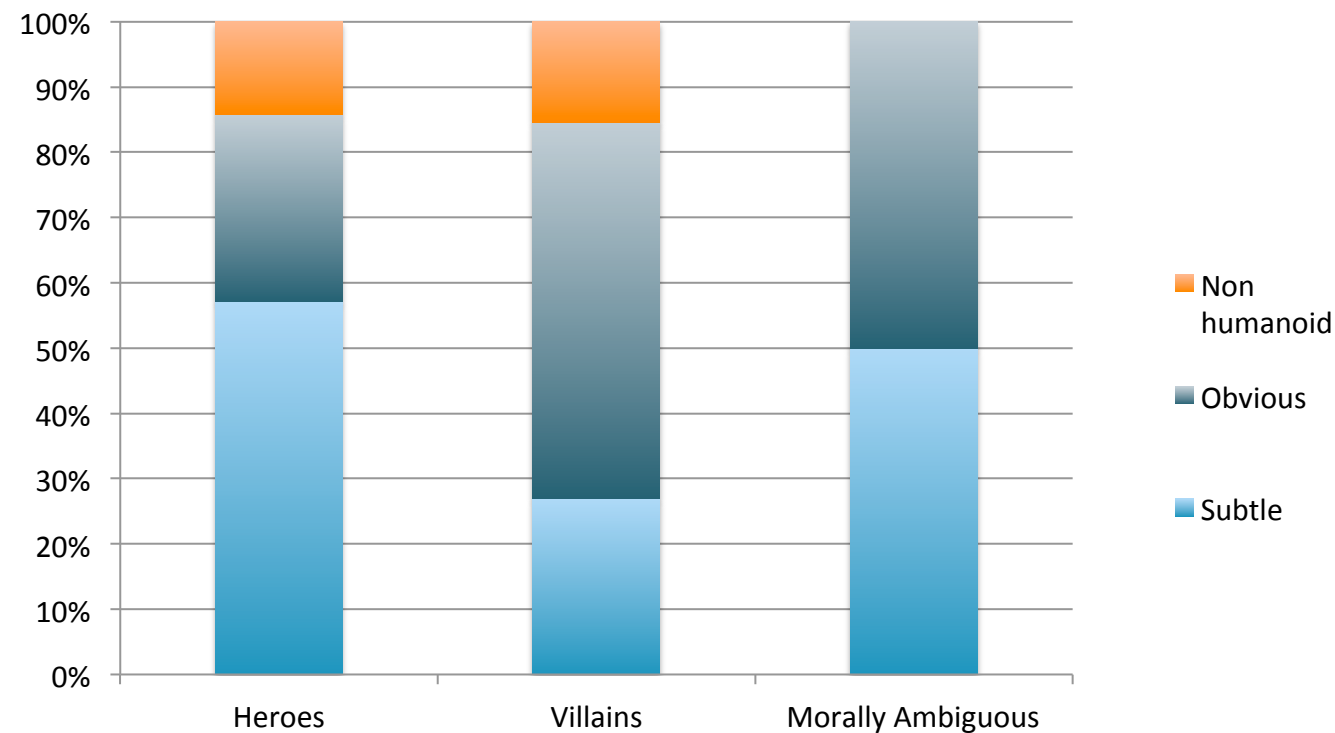
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5. Conclusion

Rather than being portrayed as a benign variation in human appearance, or even as a metaphor for resilience, facial scars are most often deployed as an insidious visual reminder that the character is damaged or bad. This likely contributes to the negative stigma faced by patients who have suffered facial burns that have caused conspicuous scarring.