

Myth and Film
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Walk into any bookstore today, and you'll find a significant section devoted to "myth." From the beginnings of human history, myth has played a generative role in our social existence, but that role has only recently come to be fully understood. Myth is not just the imaginative creation of ancient minds but the societal masking of the violent origins of human society.

Beginning in the late 1950's, with Desire, Deceit, and the Novel, Rene Girard offered us a way of understanding culture that has since penetrated every human science to a degree and with a speed never seen before. In an hypothesis now known as "mimetic theory," Girard outlined the origins of conflict in human groupings, and the way that "culture" emerged as a means of controlling the potential for violence inherent in the conflict. Though Girard began his work as a literary critic, his insights quickly led him into anthropology, which he has influenced most deeply, and only from there into other areas. (His work has already influenced economic theory, psychology, sociology and literary theory, theology, biblical studies and myriad other disciplines.)

It would be impossible to do justice to the complexity and breadth of Girard's insights in an essay of this limited scope, so I will focus primarily on the role of "myth" in mimetic theory using cinema as its illustration. Those who would like to look further in to the work of Rene Girard and those who have followed in his footsteps are encouraged to consult the website of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (<http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/>).

In short, Girard posits that human "culture" originates in the group's collective murder of an innocent "scapegoat." This "lynching" is necessary because the group is experiencing an escalating rage that threatens to turn "all against all," a rage that will destroy the group. The rage results from the frustrated desires of the members of the group, desires that are frustrated because the members' desires are all fixed on the same objects. They are fixed on the same objects because humans learn what to desire by imitating the desires of others, which leads inevitably to conflict. It is this appropriative element of mimesis that Girard highlights in contrast to the entire western metaphysical tradition beginning with Plato. This is particularly important for artists who will recall that Plato would banish all artistic mimesis from his utopian Republic.

Following the founding murder, says Girard, "culture" emerges, in three distinct categories: Myth, Ritual, and Prohibition. Each in its own way serves to prevent the recurrence of the crisis that made the first murder necessary. Myth hides and justifies the murder, silencing the voice of the victim and justifying Ritual and Prohibitions that serve

as ongoing controls that stem the outbreak of imitated desires. Ritual re-enacts the first murder in a way designed to elicit the original catharsis, but in a controlled setting that doesn't threaten the social grouping. Prohibition seeks to limit the expression of imitation (mimesis) and desire ("Thou shalt not covet.")

The critical component of this venting process (called "scapegoating") is that, in order to be effective, scapegoating must happen below the level of consciousness. That is, the innocence of the victim must be hidden from us or rather we must hide this process from ourselves. We must be convinced that the victim deserves the destruction we heap upon him (or her), that our violence is "good violence." A sense of compassion for the victim therefore vitiates the intended catharsis, heightening the risk of another wave of uncontrolled violence. Girard has shown that this necessary blindness on our part has gradually decayed over time, rendering our myths and our scapegoating less and less effective. He attributes this decay to the biblical message of God's identification with the victim of our violence, beginning with Abel and ending with God's assuming of the role of victim in Jesus.

This, for Girard, is the very essence of Gospel, that God is not one who makes more victims, but one who exposes our victimage mechanism. By telling the story of our scapegoating from the perspective of the innocent victim, God has rendered ineffective our myths, by bringing the reality that lies behind them to consciousness. The history of humankind since the Passion of Jesus is the history of our increasingly desperate attempts to find scapegoats that work, murders that can unite us, bring us peace as they once did. The 20th century, aptly called "the century of war," is emblematic of that desperation, as whole populations have been murdered in an attempt to find the peace that we once found in the sacrifice of an individual. From the Holocaust and the Balkans to the contemporary crisis in the Sudan it would appear that humans continue to seek refuge in the extermination of the "other perceived as enemy."

Cinema, as an artistic expression or imitation of life, plays a greater role in Western "culture" (understood as Girard's threefold expression of our desire to contain limitless violence with limited violence) than we may be willing to admit. The immediacy and reality of the cinematic experience today has caused it to function in a dual role. It is a primary source of "myth" in our culture, a means of telling the story of the destruction of the deserving victim that results in "peace," but film's ability to elicit visceral reactions in us also causes it to function as ritual. Movies can and do create something of the catharsis that prevents us from venting the frustrations of our imitative (mimetic) desires on one another.

Because of this duality, cinema also serves as one of the best mirrors of the function, as well as the failure, of myth in our culture. In order to examine and illustrate cinema's role as purveyor of both myth and "anti-myth" ("Gospel"), this essay will focus on one recent movie, "The Last Samurai," and use other movies to fill in or offer contrasting points.

The Selection of the Victim

Girard shows us that the victim of the scapegoating process is selected largely by virtue of his/her difference in some way from the remainder of the group. It may be something as innocent as left-handedness that lead's one to be singled out as a witch and burned at the stake, but whatever the criteria, "difference" plays an important role in our ability to see the scapegoat as sufficiently "other" to keep us from suffering compassion for the victim. In the mimetic crisis where our imitation of one another produces a doubling effect and renders us more and more like the other/rival, difference is the signal 'mark' or identifier that allows us to label or name the other as other than, and as "other-than" responsible for the crisis in the first place.

In *The Last Samurai*, the victim is, in keeping with the failure of myth, a group of persons. They are depicted from the outset as utterly other, fearless and strange, dressed in horrifying costumes, demonstrating no mercy whatsoever in their battle with their enemies, the westernized authorities in Japan. This is classic myth. There is a cultural crisis that has been created by the casting aside of "traditional" values and the adoption of Western ways. The crisis is blamed entirely on the strange group known as the Samurai. While the point of view is not the final position of the movie with regard to the Samurai, the audience is encouraged to experience the Samurai as "other" in the beginning, by virtue of their introduction in full battle dress and the absence of any "voice" until much later.

Ultimately, the Samurai emerge in the film as fully human, equally (or more so) concerned for the welfare of their people as are the "westernizers." The emergence of their voice parallels the loss of effectiveness of our traditional victimage mechanisms. The biblical voice of the victim is, according to Girard, to be credited with this change. Beginning with Abel, the victim's blood cries out from the ground. And, as the author of Hebrews points out, Jesus' blood speaks an even better word, the word of forgiveness. What sets these biblical accounts (and many others) apart is that the victim is not silenced. We hear Jesus declare over and over again his innocence in the face of the human process of creating a victim.

Because of the way that this Gospel (God's identification with our victims) has permeated western culture, we struggle to find victims who are sufficiently "other," against whom our unbridled wrath can be directed in a way that brings catharsis and peace. In the 80's we used Muslim fanatics and drug dealers, in the 90's corporate bad guys (especially pharmaceutical tycoons!) served the purpose fairly well, but in the end, our compassion for the human face overcomes it all. (The collective, corporate villain does help us remove the human face to a degree, but sooner or later a real person has to stand in for the corporate entity, and our murderous anger is averted.) The only viable enemies that can unite us all in the current day are aliens, as so clearly demonstrated in *ID4*. (In fact, *Independence Day* was probably the most successful example of traditional "myth" in film in many years, but one whose cathartic value is greatly mitigated by the absence of Los-Angeles-sized ships hovering over our real heads.)

As with any mimetic crisis, the tension and resultant violence in *The Last Samurai* encompass the entire nation, in this case divided unequally into two groups. As we have seen, the “difference” of the Samurai marks them as likely candidates for sacrifice to the scapegoating mechanism. What is also true is that the mimetic conflict is symbolized both in the world of the film and in the world of the viewer as a conflict largely between two persons.

The “Hero” and his “Twin”

As mentioned above, a part of the effect of mediated or mimetic desire is that, desiring the same objects, rivals for that object become more and more like one another. This “twinning” or doubling effect is often represented in myth by competition between siblings or heroes whose similarities mimic the experience of doubling in the community. We see this manifested in film in a variety of ways. In the *Star Wars* trilogy the conflict between “likes” is so striking that both Skywalker and Vader are missing the same hand. In the *Dirty Harry* movies, the “hero” has taken on so many characteristics of those he opposes that he is almost indistinguishable from them.

In *The Last Samurai*, the representatives of the conflict are Katsumoto and Nathan Algren. They are both warriors, widely recognized as courageous and unbeatable. They serve as mirror images of one another, warrior representatives of the two sides in the conflict.

The audience is led to expect Algren to serve as the movie’s “hero” from the outset, even though he is initially presented as a man lost in a haze of alcohol. We are not told what it is that has led him from hero to side-show-drunk, but he casts off his drunkenness in order to serve as champion for his Japanese suitors.

This “anti-hero” is typical of today’s cinema. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find an unadulterated hero like “Shane” or “Hopalong Cassidy” any more. This, too, is a sign of the decay of the function of myth in our culture. We can no longer hide the humanity of the victim from ourselves, (as we once did by dressing them in “red” skin and feathers) so the one who kills the victim can’t escape totally the brand of “murderer.” This leads us to raise up in our myth heroes who share our conflicted approach to sacrifice and scapegoating. The other kind of “anti-hero” we see is the *Dirty Harry* or *Mad Max* type. One who has no inner conflict over killing, but whose other characteristics are so different from most of ours that we can more easily distance ourselves from them. If we cannot hide the murder from ourselves, we can make heroes of murderers.

The ultimate hero of the film is not Algren, it is Katsumoto. The “evil twin” of Algren is gradually revealed to be a man of great humility and honor. The audience is lead along Algren’s path of discovery until it sympathizes fully with the hero who sacrifices himself for his beliefs. The discovery of the humanity of Katsumoto and all the Samurai does what it always does, it destroys Algren’s myth (and that of the audience as well). We

can no longer celebrate the possible victory of Algren and his rag-tag army over the small-but-fierce band of terrifying Samurai. Our perspective has been changed.

What is hidden from us, though (or what we hide from ourselves) is that the film helps us substitute one myth for another. Cleverly, we are guided to the rejection of the myth of Western violence in favor of the more “honorable” Eastern violence. While *The Last Samurai* does not offer us an “innocent” victim (he has shed the blood of many) it does pluck awkwardly at the strings of the Gospel message embedded in our hearts by suggesting that his death for honor’s sake is somehow also redeeming.

This is myth at its best. We have a death that brings resolution to the crisis, and even a death that converts the hearts of those who witness it. The process of sacralization (Girard’s word for the way that myth seeks to make gods of those whose sacrificial deaths have brought a miraculous peace to the community) has begun. Katsumoto will be revered.

What we hide from ourselves (with the clever help of the script writers and director) is the way that, over time, the “westernizers” are transformed from “us” to “other.” This is in keeping with the anti-Western tendency of modern literature and cultural pluralism. Gradually, the “westernizers” are revealed to be dirty and smelly, ruthless murderers of women and children, and finally, they hide behind cannon and Gatling guns as monstrous as were the first costumes of the Samurai. By the time that Katsumoto dies, there is a new “enemy,” a new “other,” and this one far more “inhuman” than the first.

Katsumoto’s death brings catharsis for the community in the film as well as the community in the theater. A man whose “otherness” initially set him apart as a likely victim has been killed and Japan’s unity is restored. In the process, the myth that made him “other” has been destroyed for the audience, and a new one has been set in place, a myth that makes possible the illusion of peace created by violence. What is important here is the way that the makers of the film have echoed the unconscious fears of western civilization, well grounded fears that “our” myth is crumbling, that “the center cannot hold.” In its place, however, we are just given a new one, another myth of “good violence.”

In the end, culture must always do this, substitute a fresh myth for one that is worn and frayed. It happens in every element of society. We declare that “the rich” or “the conservatives” are to blame for society’s woes, and elect Democrats. Then, when that doesn’t serve to alleviate the conflict (only God can do that) we blame “the lazy poor,” or “the liberals.” We all make myth.

As I have suggested elsewhere, (<http://www.preachingpeace.org/hollywood.htm>) there are a few films that struggle to break free from the pattern of myth-making, most notably in recent years the third of the Matrix movies. As the biblical voice of the victim permeates our culture more and more, we will become less and less satisfied with myth in all its forms, and it will become more and more profitable for studios to make films that try to do the same.