



# Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 9  
Issue 1 April 2005

Article 1

11-28-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Fitch, John III (2016) "Archetypes on Screen: Odysseus, St. Paul, Christ and the American Cinematic Hero and Anti-Hero," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol9/iss1/1>

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# Archetypes on Screen: Odysseus, St. Paul, Christ and the American Cinematic Hero and Anti-Hero

## **Abstract**

Within the national cinematic gestalt, we are continually offered portrayals of the individual redemptive journey. Filmmakers repeatedly give us versions of the hero and anti-hero. These figures have their roots in age-old mythological and religious characters, and are easily identifiable in the traditional Western and more recent Road Movie. This paper compares the mythic Odysseus and the Christian gospel's St. Paul, with a look also at the Christ-figure, in an examination of the cinematic use of the hero and anti-hero archetypes and their meanings.

Transformation in many contemporary American films occurs within the journey of the protagonist. This tendency has deep roots in traditional storytelling. In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrup Frye observes, "of all fictions, the marvelous journey is the one formula that is never exhausted."<sup>1</sup>

There are several current writings that explore the connection between religion, myth and film. One purpose of this paper is to find as much common ground as possible between Christian and secular writers, while attempting to maintain a theologically independent viewpoint. The concern is not so much with the orthodoxy of a particular epistemological criticism, but rather with advancing a series of remarks based on a personal stance and a number of sources, including Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt's *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* - a comprehensive theological criticism of film as a cultural mass medium.<sup>2</sup> John Izod's Jungian analysis of contemporary filmic icons in *Myth, Mind and the Screen* provides insight into the cultural implications of identity.<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Baugh's investigation of the person of Jesus Christ as represented in cinema in *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film* is a dependable source for the often neglected instances of the sacred in the ordinary.<sup>4</sup> And the hero's traditional journey is examined by Susan Mackey-Kallis in *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home*.<sup>5</sup>

What is a cinematic hero? What is an anti-hero? Are these merely ephemeral terms that we assign to leading characters in filmic roles? Or are they simply reflections of what and who we want to be, or how we imagine ourselves in the best or worst of all possible worlds?

In cinema, the hero/heroine is usually depicted as one delivering salvation, enacting positive change, and bringing relief from suffering or oppression. He or she usually possesses the positive traits common to the traditional notion of a hero: emotional, physical, and moral strength as well as charity and fortitude. On the other hand, the anti-hero is defined as "a protagonist who lacks the attributes that make a heroic figure, as nobility of mind and spirit, a life or attitude marked by action or purpose."<sup>6</sup> The anti-hero is often a reluctant savior - the one that we follow and adore if only because of his own fallibility and fundamentally flawed human nature. He or she is someone who resembles ourselves, reminding us not only of the ambiguous morality of existence but also the possibility of redemptive change and transcendence.

Historically, the delineation between the archetypal hero and the anti-hero has not always been clear. From Percival of the Grail legend to the Fisher King, King David to Hercules, and Odysseus to Saint Paul, the hero is usually depicted as unmistakably mortal at heart. Yet the image and mythology of Jesus Christ insists upon a combination of flesh and spirit, human mortality and divine

perfection. Is Christ the hybrid of the hero and anti-hero? How do our cinematic heroes address the dual nature of His presence - that of personal doubt and physical suffering coupled with inspired, omnipotent ability and conviction? Perhaps by questioning the idea of the Christ-like hero in cinema, there can be a collective search for spiritual identity and a re-examination of the idea of righteousness within our own experience and culture.

The stories of St. Paul and Odysseus parallel the hero-myth cycles and the spiritual dimensions of a physical journey abundant in Western literature - and more recently, in American cinema. The predominance and contemporary cultural relevance of this ancient story-cycle has been manifest in a very specific film genre, the "road movie" - essentially a contemporary continuation of the traditional "Western." The characters that populate these films are continually complex, yet seemingly familiar. The perennial rise of the cinematic anti-hero and the Christ-figure punctuates the resemblance between these newer forms and the ancient epics.

The traditional Christian story of St. Paul provides an example of the prototypical anti-hero. He was a sworn enemy of Christians. While on a journey he experienced a divine revelation and was temporarily blinded by the bright light that accompanied the voice of Christ. The experience transformed Paul and he became Christ's foremost apostle and one of Christendom's earliest and most influential

theologians. His passivity (not actively seeking transformation) is typical of the cinematic anti-hero.

Odysseus (the proto-typical journeyman) was a warrior who left his home place and family to wage war, but after the battle he was delayed and beset by many life-threatening ordeals and trials. Despite his difficulties, when he finally does return home Odysseus is a stronger force than when he departed. The journey shaped and defined his character.

It is notable to observe that Odysseus's fame does not come from his ethical or moral stature, but rather from his craftiness, stealth and dangerous cunning. In the end, when he returns home, he is not a triumphant warrior, but rather a clever murderer.

Even Odysseus's name is indicative of his nature. It has been associated with the Greek word *odyne*, meaning pain - and pain not just for oneself, but pain extended to others. This reciprocal sado-masochism reverberates in the definition of the cinematic anti-hero, the hero who is considered heroic only through receiving and in the end distributing pain.

The anti-hero, like Odysseus, is rarely happy in situations that would please other men; he is usually an outlaw type who seeks conflict and struggle over comfort and certainty. In fact, his sense of self-actualization or righteousness is only

achieved through war and strife. In Homer's story of Odysseus, as in so many contemporary films, the goal of the warrior/anti-hero is not long life, but glorious life followed by glorious death.

Odysseus also resembles the cinematic anti-hero in that he often travels alone. Homer compares him to lions and eagles, animals that usually hunt apart from their families. Ultimately, the journey of Odysseus takes on mythic and spiritual dimensions by virtue of the destination. He, like the anti-hero, is not just striving for Ithaca but also for a metaphysical sense of place. Just as the anti-hero or cowboy travels west seeking to escape his past in a new home, Odysseus flees Troy for the home of his imagination. Several times in the poem, his quest is described in terms of a desire for re-birth - a rising from the dead that can only occur when he reaches his home.

The flawed and undeniably ambiguous heroic/anti-heroic nature of Robert DeNiro's character in *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) is not so far removed from the character of Odysseus. Both men are famous warriors - DeNiro's character is a well-known prizefighter - both are coming to terms with their physical decline, both of them have to confront the expiration of their former power and embrace a new kind of distinction, and both possess a desire to return to the glory and fame they once enjoyed. In the end, after much self-reflection and examination, these two fighters are forced into a new kind of action and determination in order to

recover what they have lost. Susan Mackey-Kallis writes of this mythic process: "The Hero's journey...is both a descent into the world of liminal and passive unconscious and an ascent into consciousness and the world of action."<sup>7</sup>

The distinctions between the varying perennial characters - the traditional tragic hero, the anti-hero, the Christ figure, and the reluctant savior - are rarely clearly defined or identified in modern cinema. The occasional exception is the filmic Jesus. The difference between the Christ figure and Jesus is that the latter is usually a literal interpretation or reinterpretation of the religious person of Jesus Christ as articulated in the Biblical New Testament, while the Christ-figure often possesses characteristics of Jesus under varying secular and religious narrative constructs. In some cinematic incarnations, however, Jesus himself is represented as an enigmatic, self-doubting and more human presence, as for example in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1998) and *Jesus of Montreal* (Denys Arcand, 1990). In many cases, on-screen characters take on the traits of Jesus, St. Paul, King David, Odysseus, and Judas all at once, reflecting the uncertainty and universality of the Christic hero-image itself.

From David to Odysseus to John Wayne, the ethical and moral substance of heroic figures is fraught with inconsistencies - just as the mythology of Paul could be seen as a troubling study of aborted vengeance and reluctant redemption. A film like *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995) underscores the ambiguity of the



nature and moral character of our cultural heroes. The main character in the film is a confessed murderer, full of hate and confusion - yet, in the end, he is portrayed as a beatific Christ-figure, one who is perhaps wrongly executed for his sins following absolution by a Catholic nun. An interesting element of this depiction is that the character resembles Paul more closely than Christ. Paul was a killer who was redeemed by the intervention of the Divine. On the other hand, Jesus Christ is purported to be blameless and without sin - and therefore his wrongful execution was intended to be a self-sacrificial event by which others would be freed from their sins.

According to the Christic example, to which all of his followers are subsequently called, a man should do no harm to any other man, which means actively denying a fundamentally flawed human nature. The active direction of Christ's example lies in direct contrast to the passive experience of Paul - who was maimed and brought into submission by the calling of Christ. It is Paul's inactivity, or lack of direct action in achieving redemption, that we see in most American cinematic heroes/anti-heroes. They are men and women of violence, of revenge and reparation - essentially, purely human. Unwittingly, they are brought to a kind of "holy aggression" by circumstances beyond their control, as seen in the dilemmas faced by the main characters in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928), *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989), *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), *The*

*Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), and *The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, 2001). As with Odysseus, their redemption is marked by the blood of their enemies. Like the pre-Christian St. Paul, their pious rage is predicated by the fact that they are "fighting for the right side," or following a "higher calling," or protecting their own embattled loved ones.

Perhaps these themes resonate within the American psyche, to qualify and redeem the many moral indiscretions that accompanied the creation of the nation. There may indeed be a nagging desire to quell the collective guilt of a society that displaced the original residents of the land, enslaved an entire race for its own financial gain, and introduced nuclear warfare to the world. The idea that the hero had to do "what he had to do to get the job done" is certainly not Christ-like in the traditional sense, yet postures as a righteous stance by virtue of its dedication to a high ideal, coupled with the embrace of self-sacrifice. Such idealism is continually evident in most American cinematic heroes. They avoid barbarism and violence until pushed into a corner by insurmountable odds and desperate circumstances. In almost every case, though, when the hero does finally resort to violence he is just as vicious and ruthless as his adversaries. Many times, the hero is absolved of past sins and indiscretions through a resolute dedication to violence and vengeance, much like Odysseus. In his book, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories*, Brandon Scott cites Levi-Strauss:

The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction...We use myths to hide contradictions in the beliefs of our societies...That is, we approve of violence in our need to keep order. But the contradiction is overcome in film when the violence is evacuated from civilization after its occurrence: hence the need for the hero to leave after he saves the family in 'Shane,' 'The Searchers,' and innumerable other westerns.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of faux moral redemption - of blood and retribution, not of spirit and conscience - and its recurrence in the American cinematic Road Movie or Western is troubling, for no real change or spiritual transformation occurs. Examples are plentiful. *From First Blood* (the first installment of the lucrative *Rambo* franchise, directed by Ted Kotcheff in 1982) to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) to *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Kevin Reynolds, 1991), *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987) and *Die Hard*, the good guys seldom wear white hats and frequently murder their way to this kind of nebulous spiritual freedom which may be culturally sanctioned by a social system that still seems to reward a sadistic response to danger or any kind of threat. In American film, the spirit of Odysseus's bloody return to Ithaca seems to prevail over Paul's transformative journey to Damascus.

The fundamental moral/social reasoning for this kind of retribution relies on a selfless defense of friends, family, and country. Usually the hero allows or endures many persecutions of self, but when presented with the mistreatment of others, carnage most certainly follows. The apparent selflessness of this modus

operandi provides the hero with redemptive accolades and indulgences from his peers and society in general. Thereby, the anti-hero is wedded to the hero and the idea of absolute morality is lost; the Old Testament law of equal retribution continues to propagate itself upon the movie screens and home movie systems of America.

The Road Movie/Western, in various incarnations, has tenuous links to the "Mission Movie." In fact, the latter may be simply a sub-genre of the former. The mission movie is not a story of hopeful travel-borne enthusiasm; neither is it simply an escapist abandonment of difficult circumstances. The mission movie is usually a directional story with a singular, imperative goal: the attainment of something or someone that has been lost and must be rediscovered at all costs. This kind of filmic narrative resembles the legend of Odysseus as well as the ill-fated Christian crusades - and in a contemporary sense, the journey of the Army Rangers in *Saving Private Ryan*. In the mission movie, the hero's journey is less about escape than of acquisition and recovery - indeed reconnaissance, that is, reclaiming something lost. Mythologist Joseph Campbell writes that the hero's journey "is a labor not of attainment but of reattainment, not of discovery but rediscovery. The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time."<sup>9</sup>

The idea of homecoming is more important in these cases than of existential or physical flight. The mythological theme of this type of story resonates throughout the history of narrative form. One early example is that of Moses and the tribes of Israel, who wandered through the desert in search of a "promised land." This exedotic journey finds significant yet uneasy parallels in the character of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* and Odysseus - that of returning home, after traveling into distant magical lands. Like the medieval search for the Holy Grail and the crusades, the hero/protagonist cannot return home with honor until the prescribed assignment of recovery is completed. There are many modern correlations from the American screen, including *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis, 1993), *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet, 1982), *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *The Mission* (Roland Joffe, 1986) and *12 Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995). The deeper, more fundamental message of this kind of narrative focuses not on the obtainment of the intended goal, but rather upon the lessons learned upon the road - the process of re-attainment itself. The transformative power of the iconic wilderness in terms of the seeker's spiritual/psychological state becomes the main focus and primary benefit of the story.

Between the two journeymen, St. Paul and Odysseus, we find stark disparity: Paul is made into something greater, while Odysseus remains the ruthless

warrior he has always been. Odysseus returns in disguise to violently punish his foes, while Paul has become a benevolent force, advocating peace among his former enemies. The result is easily observed: Odysseus has gained nothing from his journeys but pain and a desire to draw seemingly justifiable blood from his and his wife's tormentors. Paul is a changed man, bent upon righting his past sins through forgiveness and a peaceful embrace of a new, benevolent calling.

Paul's type of rediscovery has few correlations in American cinema. Indeed, there are not many films about the "bad guy" becoming the "good guy" without much spilling of blood (and the violence justified as "righteous action"). The few examples that exist concern Christ - as a template of peaceful yet willful and dedicated change, as in *Jesus of Montreal* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Films about Joan of Arc evidence a cinematic piousness in the portrayal of violence for a greater cause. Such mission movies usually end in a blood bath. Consider Robert DeNiro's character in *The Mission*. Even though the hero is shamed and shackled into a true spiritual redemption, he participates with relish in a final battle for what we are asked to consider a just cause. The hero/warrior is transformed, but only briefly - only until his previously tested savage skills are needed to aid others in a desperately violent struggle.

In many American films, the killer remains true to his natural predatory instincts, though they may be temporarily suspended. This pattern is so abundant in American cinema that an attempt to cite examples may become tiresome. Consider *Apocalypse Now*, which begins as a kind of road/mission movie where our hero has the opportunity to rediscover himself and his role in the Vietnam conflict through many disillusioning events, ennui, and a fuller understanding of his own fruitless mission. But, true to the form of most American cinematic journeymen, in the end he takes up a sword and completes his assigned homicidal mission without remorse or regret. The implicit message here is that the American hero/anti-hero, under duress, has no choice but to ruin and destroy the enemy according to the directives of his superiors - regardless of his own conscience or his own moral/spiritual doubts. If his own well-being or that of his comrades is in danger, he will do what he has to do to complete the destruction of his enemy.

In contrast, the journeys of St. Paul and Christ have more to do with surrender to a spiritual calling - a calling to self-sacrifice and spiritual re-awakening. Paul originally takes to the road as a self-proclaimed zealot, pledging to quell the threat of the spiritual separatists, the Christians, and their threat to the orthodoxy of Judaism. At this point, Paul is a religious warrior, a crusader driven by a calling to purge the promised land of these new "infidels." By his own later admission, his desires were not purely fueled by religious fervor; he also desired a

bit of fame and notoriety, which would surely be bestowed upon a young passionate devotee by the Jewish religious elite of the time.

The hero and anti-hero continue to show up in contemporary American film. Stories of cinematic protagonists appear fluid over time, for the details of the stories must reflect a changing cultural landscape - in this era to fit the multi-plex and its patrons. However, the perennial and abiding significance of the leading man or woman borrows heavily from a pattern set down long ago: a pattern born of myth, scripture and an enduring narrative form. St. Paul and Odysseus are enduring models of heroism and anti-heroism. They resemble American moviegoers, who participate in the continuing epic journey of life itself.

The mythical models addressed here - the journey, transformation, redemption, revenge - find their universality in the human heart. The journey of self-discovery occurs and reoccurs in the individual's secret spaces, and on the movie screens of America.

Our films manifest the human journey set within the tenuous fabric of our contemporary society. As stressed by scholars such as Joseph Campbell, the challenge for the individual is to learn from the mistakes and triumphs of the archetypal figures. Certainly, cinematic audiences of today identify with the presented incarnations of the archetypes. Amidst all the violence, one cannot help



but wonder if there is a point ahead, on the cinematic horizon, when filmmakers will give equal screening to the hero who achieves a non-violent transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> John Izod, *Myth, Mind and the Screen: Understanding the Heroes of our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Sheed and Ward, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> Mackey-Kallis, *The Hero*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Brandon Scott, Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories, quoted by John Lyden in "To Commend or to Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies," 3. *The Journal of Religion and Film*, Oct. 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 39.