HEROES AND VILLAINS IN AMERICAN FILM

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ABSTRACT

As documented by Campbell and many other writers, the ancient hero myths continue to have relevance today, even in the supposedly debased formulas of our popular culture. Entertainment films continue the progress of hero characters and also provide a rich elaboration of more villainous protagonists, as specific genres and characters evolve to meet the personal and cultural demands of a changing society.

THE HERO-VILLAIN SPECTRUM

It seems a given fact of culture in our society or any other that myths and their derivative entertainment stories—populated by a variety of hero and villain characters—will be abundant[1]. In our upbringing, we are even encouraged to transfer fictional hero worship onto actual military and political figures, recognizing the fairy-tale fulfillment of handsome princes vanquishing witches and dragons. Many a modern race for government office is won by the candidate with the most charismatic, value-laden media image; similarly, fictional characters themselves become role models for real-life heroic action, as explained by Larry Gelbart, developer of the highly successful television series, "M*A*S*H": “The show gave the country some heroes, and heroes are always needed. The characters were heroes in a way that viewers might like to think of themselves as behaving in the situation”[2].

Heroes and their triumphs over adversity permeate our art and especially our mass entertainment, as they have for centuries. Even so, understanding the purposes and characteristics of heroes in our popular media is an often-neglected approach to analyzing the value and meaning of entertainment stories. Genre films and television series are consisstantly passed off as formulaic contrivances, abounding in stereotypes and conditioned responses[3–5]. Rarely do we realize the vitality of the continuing evolution of the hero myth, both to entertainment vehicles and to
society as a whole, nor is the story often given its due as the foundation of virtually all popular film.

Modern entertainment continues to reflect that age-old conflict of the forces of good and evil. What is to be found in film is also present, in varying degrees, in television programs, popular music lyrics, comic books, and popular fiction. However, film is especially rich in the complexities of the hero story and in the use of not only the traditional superhero-archfiend contest but also the modern evolutions of common heroes and villains, anti-heroes, and situational villains—whose value is relative to the audience member. One example of a film using situational villains is *Easy Rider* (1969), with its wandering-spirit, dope-dealer protagonists. Another is the Glenn Close character in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), who for some is a homicidal psychopath and for others is an avenging angel, giving Michael Douglas his just desserts for violating his family obligations. Thus, as we examine the various genres and tales of popular film, we find that the use of or abuse of the hero concept is often the unifying factor in a myriad of stories, styles, icons, and environments.

An excellent way to analyze the emphases, variations, intentions, and symbolic meanings that underlie the bulk of American popular film and its component genres is to see how the focus on a particular hero or villain character defines the limits and purposes of a genre. When we look beneath the surface differences of costume and chronology, we find that there is a great similarity in the characters and values of Hercules, Superman, the Lone Ranger, and James Bond, just as they as a group are conceptually different types of heroes from Bogart's Sam Spade, *Star Trek's* (1979) Admiral Kirk, and the characters played by Jane Fonda and Woody Allen.
Figure 1: Contemporary Common Heroes
Jane Fonda, Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn in *On Golden Pond* (1981). From the 1930s through the 1980s these performers have been among the strongest examples of "neighborhood" heroes who face plausible tasks with honorable determination, if not always victorious strategies. (Photo copyright 1981 University City Studios Inc. All rights reserved.)

Figure 2: The Lovable Anti-Hero
Woody Allen in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984). As an actor, Allen represents the unconventional protagonist who is not suited to the traditional role of the glorious warrior but who stirs our sympathy nevertheless with his basic human appeal. Other anti-hero postures include criminals and belligerent social outcasts. (Photo copyright 1984 Orion Pictures Corporation. All rights reserved.)
Hero types not only help define individual genres and their appeals to us at specific points in our socioeconomic history, they also cut across genres and help us see the basic appeal of a superhero or a common villain at a given point in the audience’s framework of needs and solutions. Even the fine individual films that do not easily fit into a genre—such as *Casablanca* (1943), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Rain Man* (1988)—are usually grounded in some form of the hero-villian conflict, so that comprehending the purposes of the ancient myths and their transition into hero-based cinematic film genres provides a deeper appreciation of these stories as well.

As elaborated by a host of chroniclers [6–14], the hero story, with its ritual confrontations and resolutions which help us understand and react to life’s daily challenges, is the primary dramatic structure we encounter in popular entertainment. It would even be proper to say that this ancient myth and its modern evolutionary descendants—with the related comedies and tragedies proper to fools and kings—provides a useful key to understanding and explicating most popular films that we will see. This takes nothing away from the other established approaches to dissecting film [15]—and, by extension, the other popular arts—in terms of aesthetics, technology, structuralism, or semiotics; it merely proposes that in addition to studying how a film works its cultural magic we should also be concerned with why the familiar patterns continue to have value for us.
Figure 3 shows how the specific hero and villain characters generate specific genres, subgenres, or variations on a genre. What is important here is which role the protagonist plays, from superhero to archfiend. We will find that there are types of heroes and villains in all of these stories, but the emphasis on who the lead character is remains the key as to what the story is trying to tell us. Especially in western, gangster, and horror films, we have something very different from the ancient hero structure, in that there is the possibility of the villain being the protagonist rather than the antagonist.

Gangsters are inherent villains because they are opposed to the social order, as are monsters and rustlers. The emphasis may be so completely on the gangster's perspective that the only police we see are corrupt, as in The Godfather (1972), but this does not alter that fact that the society we live in, with “hero” police and detec-
tives protecting us, wants to eliminate the Corleone clan, as we must realize and support in *Godfather II* (1974). To take another example, Van Helsing is the hero of *Dracula* (1931), yet his screen time and presence is limited compared to the protagonist Count. We may even become fascinated by, and just a bit protective of, the doctor's deadly adversary (especially in the more erotic Frank Langella version, 1979), but finally we must admit that the vampire is a menace to our continued existence.

In looking over Figure 3 we see that the hero-villain spectrum can also help us better understand some of the confusion that exists about the boundaries of certain genres. Given the vaguely understood conceptions of what science fiction, horror, and fantasy are, for example, it is no wonder that many film texts list *King Kong* (1933, 1976) or *Frankenstein* (1931) under any of the above headings or that people who reject the "science fiction" of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and *Zardoz* (1974) find themselves enchanted by the "science fiction" of *Star Wars* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982). Understanding the purpose a given protagonist and story serve for us can help better define the domain of the various genres, so that we are not fooled or confused by surface appearances. Similarly, subtleties of subgenre can make a clear concept such as the musical film become very complicated indeed as it embraces a range from *The Jazz Singer* (1927) to *All That Jazz* (1979).

As the emphasis on the protagonist changes from hero to villain, the purpose of the story often changes and we find that we have passed from the domain of one genre into another. The western is a large enough concept to maintain its environment, symbols and structure even when the villain is ascendant. On the other hand, Super-Reality and Crime stories take in too much territory to be confined to a single genre; thus, they encompass several distinct plot types which can be understood in their relationships, as long as the protagonist emphasis is clarified.

For example, at the superhero end of the Super-Reality Spectrum, we find a complex assortment of protagonists, from the tired (1984, 1956, 1984) or bitterly determined (*Mad Max*, 1979) futuristic guardians to the fairy tale (*Peter Pan*, 1953) or rationalized (*Batman*, 1989) fantasy freedom fighters. In all cases, though, the fate of the society involved hangs on the protagonist's actions or failures, as movie heroes activate tales that most closely resemble their mythic literary counterparts. Even the debasements of the hero story that are presented in the subgenres of the disaster film and the "creature feature" trace their concepts to the higher ground of the hero myth, but along the way they have been impeded by the surface concerns of celebrity casting and (frequently) low-budget special effects trickery.

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Of course there are many more genres which have been analyzed [16–21] than the ones listed in Figure 3 and we could spend much more space than presently available elaborating the ones cited, but the idea should be clear by now that the various emphases on the varieties of hero and villain characters will define the purposes and characteristics of a genre. In all popular genres—from gangster, science fiction, and horror to westerns, musicals, comedies, historical biographies, war
stories, and swashbuckling adventures—we constantly find the source of the charac-
ters, their conflicts and their resolutions to be grounded in the legends, triumphs, and symbolic values of the ancient social savior, the legendary hero.

Another aspect of hero study in film is that it provides a content analysis perspec-
tive on the shifting values of American culture in various decades. Related methods of more mythological [7, 22] and sociological [23, 24] emphasis can help complete the picture, but we should never forget that the times call forth certain aspects of the various genres in the hero spectrum of American film. The stories that succeed reflect those social needs.

The first full decade of feature films, the 1920s, was a time of extravagance, giddy optimism, and moral discomfort, as we put the war years behind us too eagerly and paid lip service to Prohibition. Is it any wonder that the primary films of the day were superficial superhero westerns, common hero slapstick comedies, the exotic romances of Valentino and Garbo, the overblown moralizing of Cecil B. DeMille's epics, and the development of Chaplin's common hero Tramp as the con-
science of these social inconsistencies?

Similarly, the Great Depression of the 1930s brought despair, cynicism, and a calculated need for fantasy and positive reinforcement. Common villain gangsters reflected America's distrust of the system just as common hero musical extravaga-
ganzas and Social Realism morale builders (epitomized by Top Hat, 1936, and The Grapes of Wrath, 1940, respectively) provided the needed positive images. Despair was more deep-rooted than we care to admit, as reflected by the great interest in archfiend horror films, with no corresponding superhero genres emerging in such grim, rational times.

The 1940s brought the obvious preoccupation with war victories in both the superhero and common hero modes, as well as in the common hero western myths of John Ford, which relived a more noble, idealized past. Common hero musicals continued to provide escapes from reality, but Crime films reflected the troubled nature of a world gone mad, from the tougher, more corruptible common hero detectives to the self-centered, psychotic archfiend criminals in the film noir cycle (Bogart in The Maltese Falcon, 1941; Cagney in White Heat, 1949).

Cold War tensions of the 1950s resulted in the continuance of film noir cynicism and dramatic anti-hero characterizations by Brando and Dean, but even westerns and musicals began taking on more substance as High Noon (1952) confronted cowardice and The King and I (1956) toyed with prejudice. The noble ideals of the superhero were corrupted and kept hidden for yet another decade, this time by the rash of "creature features." Romantic comedies were the main avenue of escapism, as fools began to evolve into common heroes (an attitude carried from Pillow Talk, 1959, and Gidget, 1959, into the next decade's beach movies).

Following the youthful exuberance of the early 1960s, which was reflected in film by the smug, technologically-laden superhero, James Bond, the second half of the decade brought turbulence and revolutionary fervor. Likewise, the anti-hero was predominant in later 1960s films, both in individual statements (The Graduate, 1967; Midnight Cowboy, 1969) and in the gangster and western triumphs of Bonnie
and Clyde (1967), the Sergio Leone-Clint Eastwood "spaghetti western" menu, The Wild Bunch (1969), and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969). Even horror films reflected the decade's emphasis on cultural misfits with anti-hero classics of psychological terror, such as Psycho (1960).

Vietnam bitterness came home in a series of anti-hero anti-war tales at the end of the 1970s. But earlier in the decade frustration over the Asian quagmire and the Watergate scandal revived interest in gangster and horror common villains and archfiends (The Godfather; The Exorcist, 1973), as well as unleashing the super-hero inversions of futuristic science fiction (which continued through the 1980s with films such as The Road Warrior, 1981, and Blade Runner, 1982). Toward the end of the 1970s a genuine renewal of optimism and escapism pervaded, with romanticism (Annie Hall, 1976), underdog winners (Rocky I and II, 1976, 1979) and the first emergence of fantasy superheroes (Star Wars; Superman, 1978, and their sequels) intended for adults.

Even though contemporary economic, political, and energy problems reflect those of the 1970s, we seem to have passed through most of the 1980s with the positivism of "the force," the enduring love of E.T., the escapist fantasies of Back to the Future (1985) and Roger Rabbit (1988), the endearing anxieties of Woody Allen, and the shallow but engaging humor of Eddie Murphy. We see the various hero and villain characters of our film entertainment world advance and recede with our needs and priorities, but in the process they reaffirm our age-old need for the inspiration of the hero story in ours or any culture (and while there have been many concerns voiced about the destructive paternalism of this mythic heritage, the current appeal of macho cinema warriors shows that this model is still viable even when vilified).

To survive as a society, we must accept what we have been and then strive to continue our evolution, whether that be done in a noble or a struggling way. Our need for invigorating heroes is eternal, just like the contemporary need to emulate them in a manner appropriate to our global context. When we look closely enough, we find this context revealed and available to everyone in the popular arts, such as the movies. What could be seen as merely enjoyable or silly is actually very instructive and therapeutically

Guided by stories of necessary, realized quests such as Field of Dreams, Dead Poets Society, When Harry Met Sally, and Do the Right Thing (all 1989), our process should be first to recognize the hidden depth of what movies reveal, but then we should back away again, to revel in the surface delights and hopes they are capable of offering as well.
REFERENCES


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