

THE POPULAR GENRES OF MASS-MEDIA FICTION; OR, PAGAN MYTHOLOGY IN MODERN DRESS

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THE 'secularisation' of modern man, the 'eclipse of the sacred' in contemporary civilisation, the rejection of the supernatural by our age, is one of the themes most frequently discussed by contemporary theologians. Their accounts of the phenomenon have differed widely. Bonhoeffer concluded that modern man was somehow 'beyond religion'; Eliade that he was 'still religious in his subconscious'; Tillich that he asked religious questions in non-religious form; Barth that he was not at all different from his ancestors.... The disagreement is to be expected since there seem to be no agreed criteria as to the method of arriving at the truth on the matter.

One possible way that may be tried to form a picture of the situation of modern man with regard to religion is, perhaps, the analysis of the most popular genres of mass-media fiction. The 'entertainment' people seek is probably as revelatory of their psychological states as anything else. The purpose of fictional excursions into imaginary worlds is, no doubt, pleasure. As Aristotle wrote and Aquinas repeated, pleasure is characteristically given by 'images', because humans delight in perceiving likenesses; and as Freud showed, the root-reasons of pleasure lie in the same soil as the deepest desires of which men are often unconscious. Images made and sought for pleasure are perhaps never quite other than somehow projections of those often unexpressed and even repressed desires. It seems likely, therefore, that the imaginary worlds evoked for the entertainment of modern man will provide convincing indices of his 'state of soul'.

Just as children's games are rarely unconnected with everyday life, but more often than not are, in fact, an *idealisation* of the

actual world of their elders, likewise many 'escapist' films are, in fact, closely related to the real world of which they present an expurgated picture. When this relation is present in accentuated form, they hover between the realms of 'play' and 'art'. Paradoxically, however, it is probable that the closer they are to play, the more likely are they to be revelatory of the secret desires of the heart and akin in nature to the mythical kind of narrative.

In *What is Art?* Tolstoy argued that European art of recent centuries was doomed to be ineffective because it was not intelligible to all. It failed to give something to the 'poor in spirit' as well as to the educated. As an example of a true and perennial work of art he mentions the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers which, he says, will produce the same effect on a Russian peasant as on a Russian intellectual and also on a Chinese peasant. (Chap. X, pp. 177 ff., in the 'World's Classics' edition). What Tolstoy seems to be getting at is precisely the 'mythical dimension' of certain forms of narrative which may account for their universal popularity. During the last years of his life Tolstoy placed great hopes in the development of the cinema, then in its infancy. With great enthusiasm he pointed out the opportunities of conveying through the cinema to the masses the profound spiritual effects formerly produced by other forms of art. Must it be concluded that this was one of his great utopian dreams which reality has shattered, since the greater part of film production has lapsed beneath even making any claim to being, in any accepted sense of the term, 'art'?

The answer is certainly not so simple. Apart from the several artistic masterpieces which have not been box-office failures, the popular cinema itself, and not only in its silent days as some Tolstoyans are wont to lament, has been an important factor in the re-creation of minds open to mythical thought. However deficient most popularly successful films must be judged to be from the standpoint of aesthetic value and without wishing to minimize this deficiency which is tragic, yet one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that their basic themes and genres correspond to the basic themes and genres of the great myths of humanity. They

constitute some testimony that as Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus*, 'When all the problems of science have been resolved, we have the feeling that the problems of existence have not yet been touched upon' – a feeling which had been inspired in Wittgenstein by the reading of Tolstoy.

It is worth recalling, in this contest, Freud's view that the aptest illustrations of mythical forms of thought were not to be found in 'those writers most highly esteemed by critics', but in the work of 'the less pretentious writers of romances, novels and stories, who are read all the same by the widest circles of men and women'. ('On Creativity and the Unconscious' – Papers selected by Benjamin Nelson – New York, 1958, p. 50). Likewise, it is in the more popular cinema that the clearest filmic examples are likely to be found.

A 'myth' is most often a story which explains the happenings and condition of the actual world by reference to some event which took place 'before time begun' or 'at the beginning of time' and which became the prototype and norm of subsequent events. The primordial event (some of the actors in which are likely to be beings higher than men) gives meaning and purpose to the later happenings modelled upon it. In this sense, it has been said that a myth 'never happened, but it is always there' – and, hence, it can be made to 're-live' actually by the carrying out of certain rites. The ritual re-enacts the mythical event in symbolic action with accompanying words and the supernatural force of the original event is thereby released. From this it is clear that mythical thought is based on a fundamental belief in some transcendent power which is the root-reason for the existence and structure of the world and its happenings.

The word 'myth' is being used in the sense now generally accepted by Anthropologists – e.g. *Malinowski*, in his 1925 study of the Triobrod Islanders defined it as follows: 'Myth... is not an intellectual reaction to a puzzle, but an explicit act of faith born from the inner most instinctive and emotional reactions to the most formidable and haunting ideas'; and he goes on to say: 'the really important thing about the myth is its character of a retrospective, everpresent, live actuality. It is to the native nei-

ther a fictitious story nor an account of a dead past. It is the statement of a bigger reality still partially alive... in that its precedent, its law, its morality still rule the social life of the natives'. And another of the initiators of the modern science of Anthropology, *Radcliffe Brown*, has said: 'The myths of primitive society are merely the result of an endeavour to express certain ways of thinking and feeling about the facts of life which are brought into existence by the manner in which life is regulated in society.' (See also E.O. James: 'The Nature and Function of Myth' in *Folklore*, 1957).

The Christian Revelation is an interpretation of the universe and its history in mythical terms – except for the all-important fact that the central event is placed in the mid-stream of history. Its occurrence as a historical event can be checked by the methods of the historian, but the interpretation of it which is the foundation of faith is based on the acceptance of the "mythical" form of thought'.

Its 'myths' are the fruit of a historically-verifiable divine revelation although expressed in human and culturally conditioned language. But form and content are related like body and soul, not like a body and its clothes, and, hence, cannot be simply separated without damaging either. This is the root error of the Bultmannite school of 'demythologisation' of the Bible which leads to the 'death of God' theology, or rather a-theology. It has to be recognised that an unmythical account of the mystery of existence is just not possible. What can be achieved is a deeper understanding of the role played by the Medium. Otherwise, the result is merely that the 'true' mythical account (the Christian) is substituted by ersatz forms (pagan). Some idea of how this happens can perhaps be formed by examining the most popular genres of the cinema and their relation to traditional mythology.

Greek Mythology is still probably the best known in the West. It may be interesting therefore to give an example from another tradition, the African. I will borrow it from Claude Pairault. (Bull. C.S. JeanBaptiste, April 1965, p. 265-272).

'When God had made maize, Death won possession of it
Death said to God: 'That which I have in my possession,

I will give it to the people then I will kill them.'
God said: 'Certainly not! I will give grass to the people. They will eat it and live, without it killing them.'

So God took the grass, and gave it to the people; but they did not eat it.

So Death retorted: 'That which I have in my possession, I will take it, take it to them. When they will have eaten it, I will kill them.'

So she took the maize, took it to them and gave it to the men.

The men ate of it. Death returned to the land of God.

Death said: 'The men are eating.'

God said: 'Yes, the men are eating. Ah well . . . when you kill them, you will kill them only one by one.'

This story was recorded in 1959, in the village of Boum Kabir, inhabited by an agricultural people (S.E. of the Tchad Republic). They believe in One God (Noba) and his omnipotence over the world and all life within it. Even though the story does not explain how Death came into being or its ontological status, it is pictured as dependent on Him, because His permit is required for it to act and the action is subject to His conditions (which, it is noteworthy, allow an indefinite future for humanity while decreeing an end to each individual). A further important point to note is that in the region, maize is irreplaceable for nourishment, and in fact the same word stands for both concepts in the local dialect. Without it they would all perish. Why is this story a 'myth'?

Because it explains the actual mortal condition of humanity by reference to a primordial event; the only sort of explanation which is adequate. This myth clearly shows a recognition that man's nature is to live, and yet he dies; that God's nature is to increase life, and yet death destroys it; that God cannot have wanted man's death, but it cannot take place without His assent; that the staple food which ensures human survival is itself the pledge of human mortality, as it is the sign of man's emmeshment in the process of change, in time.

It is interesting to compare this myth with that recorded in the greatest epic of antiquity (besides Homer): Gilgamesh. (See my article: *The Structure of the Gilgamesh Epic*, in *Melita Theologica*, XVII, 1965 No. 1 p. 1-12).

The main types of myth are consequently, cosmogonies and anthropogonies – (stories about the origin of the world and of mankind) and eschatologies (stories about the end of the world and of mankind) which seek to explain the main riddles of human existence in the world: life, sex, suffering, evil, sin, death. The resemblance of the main types of myth (Paradise Myths, Transformation Myths, Soteriological Myths, and Eschatological Myths) which have been distinguished and classified by students of comparative religion to the main types of popular film will be the object of our investigation. It is worth stressing at this stage that a characteristic of the ancient myths was their *aesthetic* quality; is the loss of this a sign of pauperisation of the imagination, or the symptom of the divorce between the desire for them and disbelief in their interpretive validity of existence?

The Rationalist tendency of thought, which dominated Western Culture in the 19th century, denigrated myths as had done their precursors in previous ages. But already the Romantics re-acted against this attitude, and Existentialist thinkers reversed it. Karl Jaspers, for instance, has written: 'Mythical thinking has not passed away; it is proper to us in every age. We need to regain the mythical way of thinking in our ascertainment of what there is'. (See his 'Truth and Symbol', Vision Books, 1959). Nowadays, hardly anyone would say that myths are absurd or unintelligible, but rather that they require interpretation.

One reason for this is, undoubtedly, that when Freud began the exploration of the unconscious, he discovered a striking similarity between dream symbolism and mythical thought. To explain this similarity, he did not think it necessary to postulate as Jung did the existence of a 'collective unconscious' – a psychic background and matrix common to all men in which 'archetypes' (forms or images of a collective nature) are present and exert their action on all men; for these 'projections of the human mind' can be explained in terms of the structure of desire in man recognised by

Freud. It is not necessary in this context to go into greater detail into this question. But it is worth pointing out that only a 'mythical' type of explanation can be given for my certainty that I will die and for the possibility of a non-destructive love. 'Mythical' does not mean irrational or unfounded. On the contrary it is the only RATIONAL explanation of these two phenomena.

Mircea Eliade (*Diogenes*, No. 41, Jan-March, 1963) has argued that epic and novel are the continuation at a different level and with different ends of mythological narrative. In both cases, a significant story or series of dramatic events supposed to have taken place in a more or less fabulous past are narrated. 'It is not necessary to recall the long and complex process by which mythological matter was transformed into epic themes. What deserves underlining is that narrative prose, especially the novel, has taken, in modern society, the place previously occupied by the recital of myths and fables in traditional and popular societies'. I think a stronger case can be made out for saying that it is film and television narrative even more than printed fiction which has assumed the rôle of myth today.

Eliade goes on: 'Moreover, it is possible to extract the *mythical* structure of some modern novels and exhibit the literary survival of the great themes and heroes of mythology.' I think the analysis of the most popular genres of film (which are also the staple ingredients of T.V.) brings out even more clearly an uncanny resemblance to the typical forms of pagan mythology. Four basic types of myth, discerned by students of comparative religion are (i) *Paradise Myths*, expressing the nostalgia for an irretrievably lost golden age; (ii) *Transformation Myths*, illustrating the fatal cycle of crime and punishment; (iii) *Soteriological Myths*, embodying the yearning after a superhuman saviour conceived as a dream idealistically removed from historical reality; (iv) *Eschatological Myths*, picturing an apocalyptic future, ambiguous in its outcome. The substance of these four kinds of myth seems to have invaded new forms and to appear in the Spectacular film, the Thriller, the Western, the Science-Fiction film. The resemblance will be delineated more clearly in subsequent paragraphs. It can be said of the popular modern passion for this genre of story, as Eliade does,

that it betrays the desire of hearing the greatest possible number of mythological stories desacralised or simply camouflaged in profane forms.

Eliade mentions two significant aspects of this recrudescence of pagan myth in modern dress: (a) the desire to escape into another world and (b) the desire to transcend time. The popularity of story-telling is seen by him as expressive of the human desire to get beyond the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of our life.

(a) The perennial popularity of 'paradigmatic' forms of narrated tales appears to correspond to a need which human beings always feel of being transported to 'another world'. The need is a complex one. There is both the desire to communicate or, more strongly, commune with others who are unknown in order to share their hopes and disappointments and to envisage what *might* have been the case if mankind had made different choices. The fascination of fiction seems to lie in the 'double reality' of its heroes and its happenings. The stuff of fiction reflects both the historical and psychological reality of a society and a magical escape from it through the imaginative creation of another world different from our own.

(b) The 'exit out of time' is, in Eliade's view, that which brings all fiction closest to mythology. The time 'lived' in fictional experience is different from that 'lived' in our daily life. A kind of transfer is operated to a transhistorical existence. The rhythm of fictional time varies infinitely, because each tale establishes its own. It is not necessarily the 'primordial' time of mythology, for it is usually apparently 'historical' time. But it is condensed or dilated with the freedom enjoyed in the world of the imagination. Fiction seems to be a response to the need felt by men of transcending the temporal rhythms of work and rest of our ordinary existence and enjoying different and strange modes of experience such as the establishment of a correspondence between the intensity and the duration of an experience which would make the freshness of discovery endure longer than the brief, butterfly-like flight of the passionate instant familiar to everyone in ordinary life. Fiction is an imaginative fulfilment of the desire to defeat the passage of time by embalming it in a permanent form which relives

with each retelling of the story, of the hope of delivery from the weight of 'dead time', time which crushes and kills the possibility of freedom, since that which took place is unalterable and the past cannot be undone.

PARADISE MYTHS

'In the beginning...' are words which sound like the magic 'open sesame' on a world breathing the freshness of spring and unspoilt novelty. It may be the beginning of the world as a whole, or since man is conceived as a microcosm, of the individual human beings; but in either case it is a vision of a primordial past, irretrievably tarnished by experience, yet still an ideal. Most 'escapist' (entertainment only) films seek to take us into this kind of world. The 'idealisation' is carried out in one of three ways (a) enlargement of the world as known in our ordinary experience (b) rhythimisation of it (c) evocation of childhood. The seeds of destruction are usually suggested in the image of the woman.

(a) The '*spectaculars*' reflect the dream of *superhuman scale*. Their aspiration to epic dimensions, however much stimulated by the realisation that bigness was an advantage the elder brother of the electronic media had which the younger could not have and however many of these mammoth constructions, launched with the hubris of the Athenian fleet set against Syracuse, end up with nemesis or a shipwreck of Titanic scale on the icebergs of public indifference, yet there is in them this dream of a world of titans, of giants, of heroes whose tale should be told in the style of a Saga, because their 'colossal' stature represents the human greatness which once 'at the beginning of time', was, and which has not been re-achieved in the course of history, but is still hankered after.

Mircea Eliade has written: 'In the last analysis, the myth of superman satisfies the secret nostalgia of modern man who, in knowing himself to be fallen and limited, dreams of revealing himself one day as an "exceptional person", a "hero"'. Often the limitless powers of Superman are shown camouflaged under a humble disguise.' (In *Diogenes*, 41, Jan-March 1943).

(b) An alternative to this change of dimension and magnifica-

of the *scale* of human existence, like a conjuror turning a sixpence into a florin, is a change of *rhythm* from the unsmooth, jagged and jogging pace of every day life to the musical, quasi-mathematical perfection of such worlds as are presented in musicals. Here, it is not a picture of titanic scale, where it is the sheer strength and weight of body that carries an implicit menace of collapse, but of idyllic settings of nymphs and unspoilt nature, where the implicit danger is in the fragility of the delicate and graceful structure evoked, like (to use an image of Evelyn Waugh's) 'a Ming vase in the hands of a gorilla'. It is not surprising that man bungled the work of grace; but these films say:

Don't let it be forgot
That once there was a spot
For one brief shining moment
That was known as Camelot.

Many '*musicals*' take us into this world where people's walk is dance, their speech, song — a world of colour and music such as exists in dreams, but not in reality: an 'idyllic existence' such as characterizes the pagan myths of the 'golden age' and the dreams of paradise.

(c) The Cinema has given expression to this myth particularly in its evocations of *childhood*. Bazin concluded from the frequency of its successful portrayal in the cinema and the relative rarity in literature that there was a secret affinity between the cinema and childhood. The films which go back to the origins of an individual's existence to picture its happiness are perhaps the deepest filmic expression of the nostalgic belief in the existence of a 'golden age', a paradise of innocence, before corruption set in.

In *Louisiana Story*, a boat is carrying a boy, along a river, and the camera captures the view of the landscape emerging out of the dissolving darkness, and the boy calls out their names in a way which evokes Adam at the beginning of Genesis, and the cosmic poetry of Claudel or Milosz. What is achieved is precisely an innocent child's vision of the world. There is no bitterness, no anguish, no unkept promises, no regret for happy harvests, but the limpid water in which gather the reflections and caresses of light.

That is the myth of childhood simply and beautifully expressed.

In *Citizen Kane*, there is a double perspective on childhood. On the one hand, it is evoked in the memory of Kane himself, as he rises to success and falls into isolation, in its mythical form as the age of happiness. On the other hand, the viewer of the film can see that childhood as the source of his later disasters. He is born illegitimate and the inheritor of wealth. He is born into two different worlds. He is the heir – because of the illegitimacy – of the world of the underprivileged whom he tries to champion in his newspaper and as a candidate for political power. But he is also the heir of the world of the wealthy, by reason of the fortune he comes into on reaching adulthood. He tries to keep a foot in both worlds and falls out of both. Subjectively his childhood evokes the nostalgia for carefree joie-de-vivre; to the objective viewer it appears as the seedbed of his later frustrations. There is much more complexity in *Citizen Kane* than this, of course; but the ambiguity which childhood assumes in the film is perhaps the key to its whole interpretation.

(d) The presentation of woman as a seducer, as the weakest spot by which corruption creeps in like an insidious serpent, which is hardly ever done in true-to-life style, but according to certain set patterns and types, giving rise to legendary conceptions of the 'stars' who embody in slightly different forms the 'temptresses', announces the next typical form of myth; the seed of the weed in the garden of paradise will flower and transform it into the human jungle of criminals and the chill of cold blooded violence on the one hand, of the sleuths and the thrill of pursuit on the other. But the dream of childlike innocence unadulterated purity, of magnificence in stature and in colour – the forms of the golden age – still haunt the imagination.

2. THE TRANSFORMATION MYTHS AND CRIME AND PUNISHMENT FILMS

1. The second main type of myth is that of a story recounting a 'fall' from the original state of happiness – the 'golden age', because of some crime the consequences of which bring about a radical transformation of the human condition.

The theme of metamorphosis is one of the most frequent in my-

thology, as Ovid's famous set of poems illustrates, whether it is man becoming beast as the result of some mysterious fault against the rulers of nature or the reverse transformation as the result of some redeeming act. The mutability of matter is the metaphysical basis of these stories.

2. It is interesting from this point, of view to compare Disney's animated cartoons built around a fixed type of antropomorphic animal with Norman McLaren's, in which in his own words (in a BBC TV film) 'things butt into each other and change into each other.' In 1947, he made a film around the French song *La Poulette Grise* which consists entirely of dissolves, fade-ins and fade-outs in time with the slow tune of the music and developed the favourite theme of this: the hen-and-egg cycle, but with the hen dividing and finding itself again eventually in the egg. Another film of McLaren's shows a blinkety-blank bird who escapes from a cage and runs into what looks like an enemy. They chase each other, charge into one another, in collisions that look hateful, but could be loving, until in a last meeting, they mate and the characteristic McLaren consequences follow in a flow: twin-hearts, flowers, the egg, oneness. The depth of the art of McLaren consists, in the first place, in the perfect relationship of sight and sound as the theme of multiplication, fragmentation and reunification is worked out in intricate geometric patterns or dance movements, in audio-visual music. In his *Pas de Deux*, which is a sort of drama of a dancer and her many selves spreading out fanwise and refusing into an integrated person, and his *Neighbours* (1953), animated with real people, the application is explicitly made to personal and social life. McLaren explores the metamorphoses of figures that disintegrate, separate into fragments, change into each other through aggression or through self-oblation, until unity is achieved again. Here the theme is developed with subtle beauty.

3. Armand Cauliez in 'Le Film Criminal, le Film Policier' (du Cerf) shows that there is an almost universally fixed pattern followed by the genre:

(i) The gangster wants to fulfil himself in a society which is unjust and does not allow him to achieve his ambitions. He becomes an 'outlaw', cut off, isolated. M. Meslin wrote of Simenon:

'Simenon's work is characterised, in part, by the retelling of the same story with multiple variations: it is that of the escape of a man of mature age, socially well-established, who breaks his social bonds, leaves his family, in search of a primitive purity, an emotional warmth which he finds only in death. Against this sorrowful figure, there stands in counterposition the strong, stable, well-balanced figure of Maigret, unchanging and always identical with himself. Confronted with the escape from order, Maigret reassures' (Cahiers Universitaires Catholiques, Dec. 1963, p.137). The two opposed figures are those of the unhappy individualist, seeking self-assertion by becoming an outlaw, and the happy conformist, who seeks the outlaw out as a menace to the fold.

Anatole Broyard has noted the importance (shown by the non-proliferation) of murders in Simenon. The act of murder is 'a crystallisation... the summation of the killer's character, a dramatic mobilisation of the scattered forces of the self, the last restor of an ego threatened with disintegration. In *Maigret and the Wine Merchant*, the murderer clearly feels that it is better to kill than to suffer the death of the self' (New York Times, July 13, 1971, p. 35). The person he kills is the agent and symbol of the depersonalising society. To Simenon, murder is 'an extreme form of psychic indigestion: the killer simply cannot swallow the victim's behaviour'. The victim usually sums up that which is offensive in society to the killer (e.g.) the hypocritical esteem in which a man whose private life is amoral because of his business or public success. 'Murder in Simenon's books, is almost a religious act. It can be committed only by a believer, a more or less conventional person.' Although the murdered man (in the Wine-Merchant Story) had slept with the wives of most of his friends, Maigret soon concludes that no one of them would kill him. They are of the same ilk as he was. None of them really cares about him as a person or wants to destroy what he stands for. Nor do any of the women he went for. 'Did you love him?' ... 'I don't know what you mean.' The only possible murderer is someone, to whom the dead man meant something, if only that his existence with an outward facade of well-being hiding inner decay was an offence against which it was right to strike.

(ii) The outlaw fails 'stupidly'. He falls a victim to his own mistakes rather than to his adversaries. The conflict turns out to be less between the forces of order and the outlaw than between inner forces in the outlaw: between his 'primitive' or 'childhood' self and his 'actual' or 'grown-up' self. His search for self-fulfillment is directed backwards towards the primitive, the solitary, rather than the social.

The rôle of the pursuers appears to be less that of hunting down the guilty man than that of calculating the respective shares in the responsibility for the crime of the different members of the collectivity. The individual appears to be the scape-goat in whom evil has erupted from the murky depths of society. To look into these, rather than to catch a criminal usually appears to be the main objective of the huntsmen. Why has society driven this man out of the hole in search of an isolated self-assertion rather than of self-development within the social framework?

That is why Maigret is so effective as the representative of the 'good' side of the established order, in reality out of love with that which the murderer struck against, but unwilling to approve the murderer's methods, because of his own psychological preference for conformism over the alternative of outlawdom. And for this he is ready to make his daily small sacrifices. That is why Maigret is the psychological antithesis of, say, James Bond. While Bond exists in a vacuum, Maigret is comfortably married and firmly settled into bourgeois life. It's not unusual for him to wonder, in the midst of an investigation, what's on for dinner. At one point in 'Maigret and the Wine Merchant', the case is going badly and the Inspector wishes he could stay in his warm bed, instead of going out into the rain to look for an elusive killer.

Between the Inspector and the Murderer, there is in common the recognition of the unworthiness of what the murdered man stood for, and the essential difference between the self-assured man of order and the rebel in a perpetual uncertainty about himself. The murderer's first question when he meets Maigret is, 'What's your opinion of me?' The murdered man asked his mistress the same question after making love. The killer is a man who had probably 'spent the greater part of his life searching people's faces to find

out what they thought of him.' The confrontation between the Inspector and the Murderer sums up the entire situation of which the crimestory is the expression.

The murderer comes to Maigret's apartment in the middle of the night to give himself up, he stands in the hallway where the light has already gone out, timidly tapping at the door. The Inspector receives him in his bathrobe; Madame Maigret serves them hot grog, asking, 'Sugar? Lemon?'

The killer apologizes for the state of his clothing; he hasn't had the means of keeping it clean. He is desperately anxious to be understood. He wants to be reassured by Maigret that his behaviour was consistent with his character. Please don't let the murder be a mistake or a solecism. He has put so much of himself into it that his whole being depends upon its 'rightness'. At the prospect of leaving with the Inspector's lieutenants, the murderer confesses that he feels a bit nervous. 'It's like going to the dentist.' Maigret apologizes for the handcuffs: 'It is necessary to comply with the regulations.'

It almost always ends like that. Inspector Maigret simply says to the killer, in effect: Well, now you've expressed yourself in an antisocial way that, for complex reasons, we can't afford to tolerate, and so we'll have to take you along to the station.'

Robert Warshaw in his essay on the 'Gangster as Tragic Hero' has argued that modern egalitarian societies require their citizens to pretend they are happy, especially in public. The Mass-Media are not allowed through direct or indirect censorship, to present a picture of the ordinary citizen as unhappy. Since some citizens are not happy, this is expressed only in *disguised* forms such as the gangster film. The 'world' in which the gangster lives does not outwardly resemble the 'world' of the ordinary citizen, but disguises it so that it does not appear to be a picture of the reality of modern society. In fact, the gangster film presents a conventionalised image of a society in which egalitarianism makes unhappiness inevitable. There is the 'upper world' — the city — which, if its rules of social life are accepted, reduces the individual to anonymity and produces the stultification of his personality. The gangster is the man who attempts to assert himself as

an individual, by rejecting society's rules and creating the 'underworld'. Ultimately he is defeated. His choice leads to unhappiness just as much as the ordinary citizen's decision to conform to the rules of his society.

The gangster film expresses the dilemma of the citizen; he can choose to fail as an individual either through *conformity*, with the consequent death of his individuality or through *self-assertion* like the gangster, with his consequent physical death. This gives the citizen the sense that his conformity is a free choice, but only out of alternatives which all inevitably lead to ultimate failure, represented by the conventional gangster film image of the City as a City of Death. The gangster film expresses the tragic consciousness of the citizen in an egalitarian state in which the self-fulfilment of the individual is impossible, but which does not allow this view to be expressed openly.

Against the correlation of disguise in the expression of the sense of inevitable doom with the indirect censorship practised in a certain type of society, it can be said that psychoanalysis has shown that the masking of the painful is a universal tendency. Warshaw's particular thesis seems to be that the deepest reason for the popularity of the gangster film is not the sadist tendency to identify with the brute for which it gives an occasion, but a deep adhesion to the old idea that selfassertion implies breaking the law. The picturing of the selfassertive man as evil serves only to disguise the real nature of this deeper appeal in order to gain social or political tolerance for its presentation in an egalitarian society. I suspect that the disguise is demanded rather by the universal temptation not to face the unpleasant directly.

Warshaw is, on the other hand, I think right in underlining the pagan 'tragic' fatalism implicit in the gangster-film. Perhaps it is misleading to associate this world-view with only the 'egalitarian' society as the would-be crusher of the individual self, and it is more correct to see the gangster-film as one typical expression of the pagan concept that the heroic person is doomed to defeat by some kind of cosmic law.

The pursuers get their man in the end not so much through their own ability, but because of his fatal mistakes. His final defeat is

seen to be the result of some sort of cosmic law of poetic justice, a last clause inscribed into the contract of existence.

Two particularly interesting examples:

– *'A Place in the Sun'*. A man plans the murder of a woman, but destiny steps in before him and she dies without his help. But he is accused and condemned. His intention had been carried out on its own accord. The judicial error of his condemnation is seen as a supernatural form of immanent justice.

– *'Chicago Nights'*. The 'negative hero' in his hideout, a room symbolically inhabited by birds of prey, kills himself, showing the 'innerness' of the conflict and of the punishment.

(iii) Sometimes, the criminal actually accepts his punishment as a kind of deliverance from a 'curse', or mysterious fate which had been hanging upon him.

Three examples:

– *The Man in Flight*. A Woman killer is finally arrested. She reacts as though saved.

– *Conflict*. Humphrey Bogart, on being captured, says 'I'm saved'. He walks to the gallows in a mystical aura.

– *The Right to Live* (Fritz Lang). The 'spirit' of Father Tom tells the 'hero', captured by the guards as he attempted to escape from prison, 'You're a free man!'

In these examples, a hint of 'salvation', even if only through death and in a mysterious way, is provided. Otherwise, there is only the self-redressing mechanism of Fate conceived in a thoroughly pagan way. An issue cannot be found out of the mire of corruption in which man has been caught up by his own sole forces. Can there be a Messiah who will bring him deliverance through some more than ordinary power?

4. It is also interesting to note that *war-films* are often cast into a fairly similar mould, consisting of three basic elements:

(i) *group solidarity*, highlighted by the ugliness of betrayal, which war tends to bring out more than any other experience, except, of course, love;

(ii) *self-sacrifice*, for the attainment of the goal set by the

group, highlighted by the ill-consequences of failure to carry it out;

(iii) *the destruction of the enemy*, in which the built-up and pent-up aggressivity is given the chance to exit from the heart.

THE WESTERN AS SOTERIOLOGICAL MYTH

The 'Western' is perhaps the most typical genre of cinema entertainment. The basic pattern of the story is related to the most central and universal of all myths: that of the Saviour-Hero.

Perhaps the character of the cowboy-hero can be best brought out by considering three typical traits which distinguish him from ordinary mortals and constitute his similarity to the demigods of pagan mythology who descend from the heavens on rescue work, i.e. his attitudes to law and order, to sex and the family, to work, money and the other necessities of ordinary life.

1. He lives in a world where violence is rife and guns are always visible. He can, of course, shoot better than anyone, but he never does if he can help it, and since he never can, he will hold his fire until the last second, until his own life would be lost if he missed. He wants peace and order, and it is for their restoration that he shoots. He does it coolly, and his coolness is his most striking trait amid the violence around. He is cool, but not content. He is a lonely figure, with a gentle melancholy hanging about him, the mark of his loneliness. But his loneliness is not like that of the gangster. The gangster is alone, because he has rejected the values of his society, against which he has set himself. The cowboy, on the contrary, accepts these values, and only regrets that they are not observed by all, nor will they be enforced by anyone, unless he takes action at the appropriate (i.e. the last) moment. The cowboy is alone because the milieu in which he lives is one in which the State is impotent to secure the observance of the laws of the game it has established and disorder occurs when these are not observed. He is the apostle of their observance. Peace and order require the service of his gun and that he should handle it better than anyone else. But he is not happy at this state of affairs. He would rather not be called upon to intervene. Yet, when he does, he does it with the same unruffled, unrebelling air

with which he would love to conform. He does not boil over because of the failure of the State. He just steps in.

It is easy to understand why the 'Wild West' would so readily be accepted not only by all Americans, but by the denizens of all big, modern metropolis. It is the milieu of insecurity in which the 'lonely crowd' finds itself there: loving conformity, but plunged into insecurity by the prevalence of violence over justice, by the establishment disorder. The lonely crowd of the modern metropolis admires the Cowboy who seeks to protect his peace even at the cost of soing it violently, and identifies readily with the melancholy resignation with which he accepts his rôle, his lack of tension in carrying it out once it is recognised as his inevitable rôle, since no alternative is envisaged.

2. The Cowboy's thirst for peace keeps him lonely in other ways as well. He does not look for love. If it comes, he accepts it, but he does not seek it. The typical situations in which he finds himself are ones in which love-making appears marginal to the fundamental problems of existence. If he happens to love a woman, she does not often belong to the West, and they cannot understand each other. The woman who understands him is the saloon-girl, for whom love does not imply an enduring personal relationship, who does not need a protecting male. For her, there is only sexual need. The cowboy's independence is his most valued possession; he does not wish to endanger his negative freedom.

3. The Cowboy is never in a hurry. He does everything with an easy manner. Hardly ever do we see him at work, even if he happens to possess a ranch. The only goods which matter to him are his horse, his gun, and the suit he never changes. If he happens to produce a wad of notes, it comes almost as a surprise; he seems to be indifferent to wealth and poverty, to where he sleeps or how he lives in normal circumstances. This apparent total freedom from material needs is what gives him, above all, his superhuman dimension. The Cowboy descends on his horse, accomplishes his task, and departs like the demigods of old, abandoning transitory love affairs and all other entanglements, on his horse.

Paul Engelmann, in his 'Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir' (p. 92-93) recalls how the philosopher enjoyed, especial-

ly in their early days, the *Wild West* films which always ended with 'a wild chase after the villain, victory of the good, liberation of the kidnapped girl, happy ending. To Wittgenstein all this constituted a similarity to the genuine fairy tale as the acting out of a wish-fulfilment dream. What he found here had nothing to do with an educational purpose, but was pure enjoyment, a spiritual release which art has ceased to offer today... Again and again Wittgenstein emphasized the significance of the "happy ending". To make a film without a happy ending, he thought, was to misunderstand the fundamentals of the cinema'. On this view, Englemann remarks: 'Holderlin in his lines on Oedipus describes man's victory over his lower nature, a victory only attained through his death, as "highest joy". In this sense, of course, the very consummation of tragedy can be felt to be a happy ending.... It is a belief built on the basic idea... that art must always lead to a solution, and the individual work of art be an example demonstrating such a solution. Whatever one thinks of this as a general theory of art, it seems to underly the perennial popularity of the Western'.

The Westerns which have tried to give a more human content to their story, such as *Shane*, or to make them more historically truthful, have only succeeded as long as they kept the mythical framework intact. In similar vein, in a perceptive review of 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid' (*The Month*, April 1970, p. 238-240), Bruce Stewart wrote: 'Like any myth, the Western has collected around it a body of dogma and fixity of practice.' He notes that Butch Cassidy's success lies in its being faithful to these 'rules of the game' - the 'horse-sense' of the Western - yet giving the myth an original twist by presenting the heroes as *puzzled* by the fact of their experience, precisely and inexplicably falling into the established pattern. 'The clichés of the form take them unawares'. This goes on becoming more apparent until the end which reaches them 'baffled losers-if not precisely to life, then at least to the Hollywood myth... In death, they are still not reconciled to the myth that has dogged them.' The film, is, hence, a sign of a growing discomfort of question-raising, of a kind of inability to be satisfied with the myth in its purity; yet of its endur-

ing hold on the popular imagination (troubled, perhaps, by the figures of Bonnie and Clyde).

J.L. Rieupieurot, in his book, 'La Grande Aventure du Western', compares the Western to the Ancient Epics of Europe and Asia. It is built on the oral traditions of tales told by the early Americans about the primitive phase of their history, just as the Epics are rooted in the legends of the early days of their respective peoples. Its 'credibility-value' is the same as theirs; not historical, but mythical.

'It is true that supernatural persons and prodigies, such as gods, goddesses angels and saints, do not haunt its universe or intervene in the course of human actions, but is this enough to deny an epic character to the Western? If we think that their presence may be secret, unavowed, transposed, then we shall see them transfigured according to the particular nature of their environment. The nature of their (Western) environment and of its inhabitants, settlers or wanderers, calm citizens or shooting meteors across the horizon, did not allow the American epic to be peopled by the abstract beings favoured by the old legends. But the key characters of the western have in themselves the supernatural dimension which can transfigure a sheriff, a cowboy or a herdsman into a hero or a demon-outlaw according to whether he serves Goodness and Justice or Darkness and Evil.

It is not certain, moreover, that oneday in time their personality and actions will not leave the native soil where they have lived and poets won't admit them to the world of the unreal and the marvellous. Jesse James and Billy the Kid found, on the morrow of their brutal death, an easy access to the kingdom of shadows where the memory of the dark actions of hereunder are lost. Voices were raised to their glory and they grew into archangels, in such a way that their names are still surrounded with a beatific popular veneration which forgets the trouble raised elsewhere by their turbulence and their exorbitance in the service of evil. Legend ensures the passage to immortality and dowers its beneficiaries with a super human dimension' (p. 420-1).

Rieupieurot wrote these lines before the days of the strange and complex phenomenon: *the Western 'all'italiana'*.

(d) THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MYTHS AND SCIENCE-FICTION

From its very beginnings, the cinema made use of its potentialities of evoking the marvellous by producing films of the genre later to be called 'science-fiction' and which look forward to a transformation of life such that it spells the end of earthly existence as we know it.

The genre was initiated by Georges Méliès in his *Voyage dans la lune*, as far back as 1902. In the study *Images de la Science-Fiction* by J. Siclier and A.S. Labarthe (7e Art, du Cerf), it is said that Méliès does not take science seriously. It provides him with his own elements: the vehicle and the theme of interplanetary travel with which he replaces the magician's wand, the devils and the fairies of his previous scenarios. In short, it allows the cinema to introduce us to the marvels of the modern age which already had begun to take the shape of a myth. It is because of this that Méliès did the work of a forerunner' (p. 15).

'The most significant title of all his productions is "The Voyage across the Impossible" (1904). For, whether it is a matter of the moon, or the sun, or the Pole, it is always an impossible exploit which has to be accomplished. Science introduces this exploit into the realm of the possible, but it is envisaged from the point of view of the poetical imagination. For Méliès, science is a mystical key: it opens up all the realms which are forbidden without it' (p. 16-7).

The later cinema has produced more complex examples of the genre. To quote a bare minimum of significant examples:

In 1926, Fritz Lang made *Metropolis*, surely a prophetic film. A palace directed from on high by the Masters, worked by the Slaves. The people in the middle-formen and subordinates – are obliged to side with the strongest. But in the underground of the subhumans, a girl, Maria, pacifies the misery of her cogenerates by her evangelical action. Taken into the presence, one day, of the son of the supreme Master of Metropolis, she provokes in the young man a dangerous passion. For he, in the name of love, begins to think of a coming closer together of himself and the slave people. The Master sees it differently. He entrusts it to his damned soul, the inventor Rothwang who lives in one of the tunnels des-

ending downwards, to 'solve' the situation. Rothwang builds a robot in the likeness of Maria. Maria is imprisoned and the robot is made mechanically to move the slaves to revolt, affording the Master the occasion to exterminate them. The factories are laid waste in the great struggle and the living quarters are flooded. But, thanks to Maria and the son of the Master the population escapes to safety. The false Maria is shattered and Rothwang perishes on the floor of the gothic cathedral. The two hostile forces become friends and the era of well-being begins. The Christian, apocalyptic overtones are more obvious visually in the film.

'The dehumanised crowds of the underground city, halfway between men and robots, these "submen" pitted against the "supermen" of the city on high, evoke, as they appear in Lang's imagery, the deportees to the concentration camps going to work until their ensuing death. The human slave is seen in a way as the last stage towards the domestic robot. This "prophetic" aspect, of course, only emerged later' — observe the authors quoted above. Rather, however, than a prophecy of the Hitlerian era, what Lang had in mind is clearly an eschatological picture such as have always haunted the imaginations of men in ages when a sense of impending doom was created by their historical situation, when they felt that a chapter in history was being closed and another opened. It has been shown that this is the climate in which Utopias flourish — none were produced between Plato's *Republic*, and More's *Utopia* rapidly followed by Campanella's *Città del Sole* and a number of others. The eschatological myth is closely linked to political questions: the relationship between the Kingdom of God and political structures.

So are, of course, the anti-Utopias typical of our age. (Science gone mad). From this point of view, Godard's *Alphaville* is a significant example. As a critic has remarked: 'As well as its obvious basis in popular fiction and strip-cartoon, *Alphaville* is rooted in a wider, more time-sanctioned mythology... Two myths in particular seem to me important as background to *Alphaville*. The more obvious is that of Orpheus and Eurydice. Natasha is a shade among shades: Lemmy-Orpheus descends into the underground to bring her back to life — to bring her light, the fire of her cigarette-

lighter, which makes him also like Prometheus, who defied a father-figure as apparently omnipotent as Alpha 60. Natasha is in a sense the centre of the film, its most complete character in the traditional sense – i.e. the one most nearly approaching a rounded reality – and *Alphaville* is about her resurrection, the film's most intense and beautiful image'.

A more complex example still is *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This is because the style employed is perhaps the most *ritualized* seen so far in the cinema. As Jean Basile wrote: 'The plot is just an ordinary space-fiction adventure... In fact, the success of this film is built on a number of other points. The story, in the first place, is a Utopia and the interest of the young in the world of tomorrow is well-known. It is mysterious, hence allows a wide range of interpretations and authorizes the individual imagination to find what it seeks. The music... is omnipresent and has given Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" an entry into the world of Rock. The eye, finally, finds a grandiose visual poem over which it can roam without any preoccupation other than to see. There are, of course, the satellites infinitely revolving in the infinity of the void... The abstract sequence of the fall on Jupiter.... takes up the latest cinema technique known as the "kaleidoscope of LSD 25". That is, the visual images are a projection of mental images in a manner which makes us realise better the genius of Walt Disney when he made *Fantasia* – the psychedelic utopia, or the "eschaton" envisaged by the generation of the Woodstock Festival.

OLD AND NEW PAGAN FORMS: VALUES AND DANGERS

The analysis of the staple ingredients of what has been called 'popular, non-aesthetic' cinema yielded a substance with an uncanny resemblance to pagan mythology: the nostalgia for a hopelessly tarnished golden age, a fatalistic acceptance of the cycle of crime and punishment seen as the alternation of hubris and nemesis, the yearning for a superhuman savior nourished as a dream idealistically removed from historical reality, finally an apocalyptic future, engineered by science, ambiguous in its outcome... All this is sought as 'escape' from the real world around

us, but the refuge is still too closely related in its characteristic features to the prison it was intended to eclipse for the 'evasion' to be considered a mere matter of pure play. The invasion of the substance of the old myths into the new forms makes it a case of what Nicholas of Cusa called 'serious fooling' – a favourite past-time of the Renaissance humanists who were fascinated by what they took to be the convergence of pagan mythology and the Judeo-Christian tradition. (See E. Wind: 'Pagan Myths in the Renaissance', Faber & Faber).

What can a truly Christian attitude be towards these new pagan 'forms' produced by and characteristic of the culture of our electronic age?

(a) In the attitudes of the early Christians towards the pagan art forms and culture syndromes of their pre-literate, and hence figurative, age at the popular level, two sharply opposed positions emerge. On the one hand, some, like Tertullian, condemned them wholesale as diabolical and evil; on the other hand; others, like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, following the example of the Apostle of the Gentiles at the Athenian Areopagus with, moreover, apparently greater success, welcomed them as stepping-stones to Christianity – forms made obsolete by the fulness of revelation, but still a ladder which could be climbed to reach the Truth –, then thrown away (as Clement of Alexandria put it in his *Stromata*). The ultimate prevalence of this attitude is evidenced by the initial adoption of pagan art-figures given a Christian content (such as the adoption of the Hermes Crioforos as the Good Shepherd). With the disappearance of paganism in the part of the world known to Christians, first in the Byzantine East and later in the Latin West, specifically Christian images, from wall-painting to icon and gradually in any other medium, were produced.

As late as 800, the Libri Carolini speak of the difficulty of distinguishing images of Mary and Venus.

(b) For an era, it was as if, for Christendom, paganism existed no more and there was no missionary problem, involving the dialogue of living cultures, any longer. There was, however, the great issue of the heritage of pagan philosophy which the Arabs

brought again to the knowledge of the West. Victory, again went, in time, to those who were ready to extend a discriminating and qualified welcome to the new 'ladder' – without even the need of discarding it completely after use. Images foreshadowing the truth have a permanent, mind-disposing function, as preliminaries to Revelation.

(c) With the Renaissance, *both* the discovery of the New World and new routes round the Old so that the missionary challenge represented itself *and* the recovery of the unbaptized (i.e. authentic) pagan culture of classical times, the issue was again re-debated and the same two diametrically opposed concepts re-emerged. This time, however, it was the idol-smashing Francis Xavier whose methods triumphed, while his fellow Jesuits, Ricci and De Nobili who favoured the mandarin-with-the-mandarins and guru-with-the-gurus approach had to suspend operations.

Today, they have, however, been proclaimed right by the Second Vatican Council and their attitude resumed by such pioneers as Monchanin, although they are still opposed by some Protestant theologians, especially of the Barthian School, such as Kraemer. (Cfr *La Vie Spirituelle* (435) Jan 1958 p.72-95).

This potted history is instructive, if, as has been argued, the culture of which the 'popular, non-aesthetic' cinema is the expression has an affinity with the pagan cultures of the past. Indeed, it is not too difficult to make the necessary transpositions in order to arrive at a determination of this attitude.

VALUES

(a) A first consideration is a value which deserves to be more appreciated today in a technological age in which habits of thought tend to be moulded above all by the methods of the natural sciences and is still haunted by the Cartesian ghost-in-the-machine picture of man – than it could have been in early Christian times. Cinema entertainment helps precisely to restore to modern man the ability to think 'mythically' or, in other words, the faculty of symbolic thought. Without it, access to faith in Christianity is closed. This constitutes, clearly, an important contribution to opening up the road to Faith.

(b) The very content of the myths is such that they can serve by contrast and comparison to prepare the mind to perceive how surprisingly yet accurately the Divine Revelation in Christ meets the deepest aspirations and often not fully conscious needs of man – those he hardly dare express, so bold and big do they loom to the mind which does not know the gift of God, that they only emerge disguised in ambiguous images: *larvatus prodeo*. In its very aesthetic poverty, the popular cinema can prepare for the joyful surprise of secret dreams come true.

(c) Moreover, all genuine communication requires finding something in common to serve as a medium. When persons share a world-vision, the task is perhaps not too difficult. When, however, communication has to be attempted between persons with different backgrounds and world-visions, there must be a search for symbols and images which can be mutually understandable because they flow out of the zone of experience they have in common. Just as the early Christians had to seek for intimations of Christianity in the pagan religions when approaching pagans, in a manner similar to the way in which they presented Christianity as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies to the Hebrews, likewise today's Christian witness must find the common ground shared with the unbelievers of today – whose 'myths' are those of the film world. The analogy of these to the ancient myths is not accidental, for both are attempts at the same type of clarification of the fundamental structures of human existence and the dynamism of the struggle between Love and Aggression. By reviving these myths in a manner appealing to the modern mind, however poor they may be in comparison to the great 'aesthetic' myths, cinematic experience can create a symbolic language such as was provided by the Ancient Near East Cultures to Israel and by classical culture to Christianity. Although it must be remembered that the deep meaning of Christianity can only be adequately grasped from within the community of believers, this is not to say that there is nothing in common with the values and images of those outside with which there can be some degree of communion. The first step towards this is understanding in depth and the effort to find the elements of a common language which in our day can hardly be any-

where except in the Media Images.

DANGERS

(a) There is also the danger noted by the Fathers with respect to Pagan Myths and by Aquinas with respect to all use of images: that of mistaking the image for the reality, the danger of idolatry. This does not mean that a cult of the 'cinema-gods' will be developed similar to that of believers towards God, — although some filmfans actually come close to it in their attitudes both internal (imitation of the way of life) and external (pin-ups, etc.) to the 'stars' of the electronic media; but it means that the habitué confuses the 'escapist world' with the real, or, to put it in other words, will accept the world picture provided by the entertainment media as authentic, the mythical adumbrations as the definite truth, instead of as an easily deceptive shadow. This would be the result of taking the mythical world of the cinema too seriously, to fail to realise that it is really more 'play' than 'art' as these have been defined above.

(b) The converse danger — also a mistake about the nature of the relationship between image and reality — is to take the mythical world of the entertainment cinema as *pure* play and to miss its subtle connexions with the reality of which it is an ideal projection. The result of this danger — perhaps more easily fallen into than the first by all but the most unsophisticated — is likely to be a cynical despair. The tenuousness of the artistic dimension is the cause of this failure to engender hope, by thinning out the threads linking the ideal projection with the actual reality. The point was remarkably perceived by Coleridge: 'Hope is the master element of a commanding genius, meeting with an active and combining intellect and an imagination of just that degree of vividness which disquiets and impels the soul to try to realise its images' (*Biographia Litteraria*, ed. Potter, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, 1950, p. 399).

(c) Finally, all *mythical* explanation produces dissatisfaction in a reflexive mind until it is seen to have a *historical* fulfilment in Christ. Unless the hidden reference to Him is seen, it is difficult

to have even real 'enjoyment', instead of mere 'distraction', and the real world will remain wrapped up in the ambiguous mood of bitter-sweet melancholy characteristic of the classical world. Myths are valuable when they act as a stimulus to reflexion, when they give food for thought. When they do this, they become works of art and rise into a higher sphere.