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Some Avatars of Mythical Heroes In Today's American Movies and Cartoons

The study of Romanian Popular Culture (or Urban Folklore as it is most usually called) is still at the beginning. In communist times, the 'official' critique was stuck in Socialist Realism, and in making it accepted as the only true type of aesthetic value, whereas 'noble' critics and writers were trying to encrypt their writing, and, therefore make it aloof from reality and what was going on with the public's tastes.

The public, at their turn, had very few choices, on one hand, as there was the so-called pop music, the comedians (actors who were mostly employed by comedy theatres), and the few hours of television every day, especially on Saturdays and Sundays, when the midday 'magazines' had a freer type of selection. Magazines, on the other hand, employed a moralizing type of attitude both in their columns, and in caricatures and drawings.

The only real contact with the Western and American civilizations was made through movies (the ones, of course, that passed through the straights of censorship), foreign radio stations that people listened to risking their freedom, and relatives and friends abroad who would send over records, and later on, videos, or magazines from the 'free' world.

Real popular culture, based on public taste and talent, could be met with only with gypsy suburban bands, the so-called tarafs (urban gypsy music), rock music (especially the band Phoenix), and in jokes, of which the political ones reached, sometimes, peaks of perfection, if told by the most gifted joke-tellers. Some of these talented joke-tellers were seen as heroes, especially if they told political jokes about Ceausescu, the Communist Party and government, and about the Securitate. They would do so although they knew they could actually be arrested.

Writers, painters, dancers, musicians, nevertheless, were an entirely different category, they were busy with high art and culture, critics would only write about them, and their work, and were very little interested in the phenomenon of Popular Culture.

In the U.S.A., though, Popular Culture has developed enormously over the past 50 years, especially as information and choice widened, and people started having opinions on life and started defining their own life-styles according to these new choices.

Consequently, many human activities, which had not been seen as cultural manifestations, became domains of interest in the vast field of Popular Culture.

Thus, besides the cinema, and the TV shows, country music, rock music, jazz, and cartoons in magazines, there appeared other interests that became part of what we call Popular Culture: hip-hop, advertising, food, fashion, religions (New Age, Asiatic, Scientological, etc.), a part of the laws issued by politicians (in favour of homosexuality, minorities, women's rights, environment, etc., with great impact

on a social level). All of these aspects, and other more, could be said to be part of what we call Popular Culture.

At first, even in the US and Western European countries, popular culture was feared, as it was considered to be subverting high culture (Strinati 225). Once postmodernist theoreticians appeared, they maintained that the era for 'high' culture was over. Such views were based in the 70s on such artists like Andy Warhol, especially in his

...multi-imaged print of Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting The Mona Lisa [...] The print shows that the uniqueness, the artistic aura, of the Mona Lisa is destroyed by its infinite reproducibility through the silk-screen printing technique employed by Warhol. Instead, it is turned into a joke – the print's title is "Thirty are better than one".

(cit. by Strinati 226)

Warhol also used this technique to multiply Marilyn Monroe's image as well as photos of soup cans and Coca-Cola. Based on such abruptions, on breaking canons, on de-centering the world, such authors like Martin Irvine show that all metanarratives are deconstructed replaced by local, regional narratives. His starting point in talking about postmodernism generally, is Jameson, who was the first to point out that

...the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture...

(cit. by Irvine)

Strinati also shows that

Metanarratives, examples of which include religion, science, art, modernism, and Marxism, make absolute, universal and all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth. [...] In the post-modern world they are disintegrating, their validity and legitimacy are in decline. It is becoming increasingly difficult for people to organize and interpret their lives in the light of meta-narratives of whatever kind. (Strinati 227)

Nevertheless, a continuation of such metanarratives, could be exactly the re-telling of the stories of legendary heroes, of legendary human facets as seen in the popular culture movies and TV heroes, if we look at them as to nothing but avatars of mythical heroes, as we shall see. They are not treated ironically, either – it is well known that postmodernist art and literature often employs pastiche – such heroes are in a way perennial facets of human ideals. There are, of course, such movies as *Men in Tights*, by Mel Brooks, in which the director makes an inventory of postmodern clichés by referring to the legendary hero Robin Hood.

Still, no matter how 'new' all of these Postmodern – Popular Culture developments may be, there is a sector of Popular Culture where they are not visible, where old tendencies of the American culture are present, alive, still full of vigour.

One such tendency of American culture is the presence of avatars of mythical heroes in cartoons. Most of the heroes of magazine cartoons (Batman, Superman, Spiderman, etc.) are nothing but avatars of leg-

endary heroes in European myths, as A. Ciugureanu so comprehensively shows in her *The Boomerang Effect*. These heroes undergo the classical rites of passage, of initiatic experiences, they overcome difficulties and defy dangers and enemies; they are endowed with supernatural powers, but very often they win due to their so very natural human virtues like courage, loyalty, love, etc.

This entire gallery of heroes are they American avatars of Hercules, and Siegrfrid, of El Cid and Roland, of the Knights of the Round Table, etc., etc. the entire gallery of cartoon super-heroes has been transposed into movies, and it seems that their lives are far from being over, as movie with superman, Batman, and Spiderman were shot in the 90s as well, and continue to be attractive for the new generations of the 21st century.

Commentators approaching movies from various points of view, all agree that mythological figures are present in modern movies. A commentator who comes from the domain of religion, for instance, notes that

Filmmakers repeatedly portray 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 Movies [...] in a majority of American films, Odysseus and Pauls become one and the same, and the journey of redemption is blighted by blood, rather than illuminated by divine light. (Fitch)

It is true that some of these characters have received new features, they express concerns and preferences of another generation – for instance they are less and less supernatural, and more and more concerned by nature itself; they are less and less patronizing towards women, and more and more inclined to appreciate women as equals, etc.

Another very important source for Popular Culture heroes and especially, anti-heroes, comes from the trickster tradition of the Native-Americans: Coyote, woody the Woodpecker, Bugs Bunny I cartoons were then followed by human tricksters, like those in daytime comedies, the so-called sitcoms, or in borderline TV thriller series. These characters are avatars of cartoon tricksters combined with the classic movie tradition of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Stanley and Laurel, etc.

This type of hero is not perfect, on the contrary, he/she displays many faults and vices, nevertheless they have that quality that makes them loved by the large public: they are so human that one can identify with them immediately. Examples of such heroes are Al Bundy, from the sitcom *Married With Children*, Joey and Phoebe from *Friends*, George Costanza from *Seinfeld*, Will from *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and many others. They are somehow at the margins of society, either because of their so unimportant occupation (Bundy), or because their so ever-confusing tastes (Phoebe), that their view on life and reality is more objective and reliable than that of very many other ‘dead-serious’ commentators. They sometimes stand in the way, pretend to do right even if they know they do wrong, fool people, show a total lack of understanding, but, like any other trickster, they are capable of moving things around them, of showing people what humanity really is.

The American history provided Popular Culture with yet another type of hero: the lonely, brave law-enforcer. Coming from the tradition of the Wild West, with its gunmen and sheriffs, hunters and gold-diggers, this hero is typically American. He is the conqueror of the West, the defender of its values, the keepers of its most profound ideals of manhood. The modern avatars of Billy the Kid are such characters as Riggs, in the series *Lethal Weapon*. Lt. Riggs is able to survive any attacks, is able to defend his friends and his community by showing great courage, sometimes insane courage, even. At the same time, one detects deep humane feelings hidden under a mask of irony and detachment. Such heroes are

devoted completely to their cause, many of them are lonely men, either by their own choice, or because of tragic accidents, they are sometimes quixotic figures (like Mulder in *X-Files*).

Many other mythological heroes and anti-heroes can be traced back to if we look a little further into some of the well-known American movies, some even take their names from legend, like *Fisher King*, for instance. In De Niro's character in *Raging Bull*, we can read a modern version of Odysseus, while the series *Matrix* brings to the postmodern eye a new Prometheus. An entire gallery of heroes resembling St. Paul, Don Quixote, Sir Gawain, and King Arthur appear in such movies as *First Blood* (directed by Ted Kotcheff in 1982), *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood 1992), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (Kevin Reynolds, 1991), and many others. John Fitch in his article quotes these movies, too, in order to conclude that from a religious point of view

...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 (Fitch)

It is true that many times heroes and anti-heroes have a similar reaction, and resort to violence, as violent is our life these days. It is also true that sometimes movies distort original stories, as in the case of the modern animated fairy-tales (the series *Shrek*, for instance, where the order of the fairy-tale distribution is upside down). Nevertheless, such movies as *Saving Private Ryan* is less about the violence it displays, as about an millenary quest of man for the promised land, a mixture of a Quixotic dream, combined with a modern Aladdin, a Moses leading the Jews, and spiced with echoes of legendary American heroes as Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. Such movies are also quoted by Fitch, who gives a special attention to what he calls "Mission Movies"

*As in the medieval search for the Holy Grail, the hero/protagonist cannot return home with honour until the prescribed assignment of recovery is completed. Modern correlations from the American screen include **The Searchers** (John Ford, 1956), **Thelma and Louise** (Ridley Scott, 1991), **The Fugitive** (Andrew Davis, 1993), **The Verdict** (Sidney Lumet, 1982) [...] 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.*

Beautiful feelings, the romance of the minnesingers, the romances of the rose, fairy-tales, survived especially in animated movies, where apparently it is easier to speak about such humane subjects. An entire gallery of movies, from *Shrek* to *Ice Age*, from *Finding Nemo* to *Cars*, bring a gallery of characters that embody such feelings. At the same time, other movies make use of old legends of the Brythons and the Celts, a legendary past that is brought on the silver screen only to exemplify a very modern urge towards justice and ideal. Such movies like Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* illustrative of this new direction.

We may conclude that such patterns coming from the classical Indo-European tradition, or the Native-American one, as well as of the Asian ancient stories live in the heroes of today, of which we have mentioned especially those exemplary characters in movies and cartoons. They also appear in literature, the public tries to identify such heroes in public life, as well, in talk-show moderators, politicians, other public figures. More or less, any such public figure revendicates him/herself from such long-enduring archetypes.

As for Romanian culture, we are still waiting for Romanian heroic figures to appear on the screen.

Where are the avatars of Făt-Frumos , Prâslea, Harap Alb (all fairy-tale Herculean figures)? Where are the modern avatars of the glorious and much-adored outlaws? Romanian movies have used such figures but only as the characters' themselves, biographical movies. There are no contemporary characters either in movies, or in the recently picked-up Romanian sitcoms to resemble these Popular Romanian figures. Romanian movies, TV series and sitcoms are populated with either pathetic or tragic heroes representatives of these so confused post-revolutionary times, or with Romanian variants of paranoid heroes of the metropolis, most of the times copied from American sitcoms. There is nothing in between.

Reference notes:

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Rezumat

Cultura populară, cum este numită de critica anglo-saxonă, sau cultura de masă, după cum este numită de criticii români, a fost într-un con de umbră în timpul comunismului, pentru că artiștii erau preocupați doar de ceea ce se numește "artă înaltă", formele populare fiind total ignorate. În același timp, în spațiul american, cultura populară a prins aripi, în sensul în care s-au dezvoltat mai multe domenii ale acesteia, ca filmul, televiziunea, publicitatea, video-clipul muzical și publicitar, muzica rock, pop, hip-hop, gastronomia, moda, sistemul legal și politic, lumea virtuală, care, luate la un loc, delimitează ceea ce putem numi un mod de viață, puternic ancorat în realitatea postmodernă, așa cum o definește Martin Irvine. Cu toate că această cultură, sau sub-cultură după cum o numesc unii, pare a fi foarte nouă, de fapt se bazează pe niște arhetipuri culturale străvechi, aparținând atât culturii indo-europene și asiatice, precum și celei nativ-americe și afro-americe, în funcție de populația care le-a impus în spațiul american. Astfel de arhetipuri sunt eroii mitici, atât ai spațiului antic grec și romanic, precum și ai perioadei cavaleresti europene, ai culturii tradiționale a indienilor americani, precum și a culturii afro-americe. Acești eroi pot fi identificați în filmografa americană, în rolurile tipice care se pot citi ușor ca variante moderne ale unor eroi ca Hercule, Siegfried, Beowulf, regele Arthur, Don Quijote, etc. Ei sunt Superman și Batman, șeriful și pistolarul, agentul FBI și detectivul etc. În afară de film, asemenea tipologii apar și în desene animate, în televiziune, în sitcomuri, etc. într-un fel, acești eroi continuă meta-narațiunile tradiționale, în ciuda filosofiei postmoderne. Cultura română este încă în așteptarea unor asemenea eroi de extracție tradițională, așteaptă încă filmul în care să recunoaștem asemenea arhetipuri ca Harap-Alb, Păcală, Prâslea, pentru că, deocamdată cel puțin, filmul de artă pare a fi ancorat în patetismul tragi-comic postrevoluționar, iar televiziunea în copierea unor rețete americane și sud-americe.