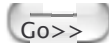


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Movies as Myth-- Cinema's gods and goddesses -- and why we care

By Barry Caine

Long before Arnold Schwarzenegger was a blip on the political screen, I interviewed the mega-popular action star, then stopped for lunch at a favorite cafeteria.

When I mentioned I had shaken hands with Schwarzenegger, who was shorter than expected but wide as a bus, the two women serving food said, "Can I touch you?"

It was as if he were a deity and some of his magnificence had rubbed off. By touching me, they would touch him, and, apparently, get a spiritual or emotional lift.

Although the interaction was a little creepy, it was not that surprising.

People view movie stars as larger-than-life characters who mirror the images they project on the big screen.

Since the early 1900s, when silent films became popular, movies have represented a loftier, Mount Olympus-like plane of existence, with actors as the gods who inhabit it.

Like the old Greek gods alluded to in the film "Troy," the new mythological figures seem powerful, remote - and vastly different from you and me.

They're rich, talented, good-looking, famous and lucky. They have no worries and, despite an occasional indiscretion, they lead perfect lives.

Or so we think.

What we know is, if we can't have their lives, we want to experience them vicariously.

So we use movies as myth and movie stars as mythological figures "to show us the distance between our own lives and the lives we would like to live," says psychologist Randy Cornelius, professor and director of the American Culture Program at Vassar College in New York. "When we say film stars are 'larger than life,' we are thinking about them as different from us, as different from humans."

As gods, they fascinate us, help us feel, give us hope and provide something to aspire to.

For that we are thankful.

"An anthropologist from Mars might look at people going to

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behavior," Cornelius says. "Certainly, when people see film stars and let out audible gasps, a Martian anthropologist might say there's something divine about that."

<-subtitle->How we worship Instead of burning incense and genuflecting, we pay homage by buying tickets to the stars' movies, then watch with reverence.

"I've often thought of a movie theater as being like a secular temple," says Ken Burke, professor of film studies at Mills College in Oakland. "You go into this quiet, dark space and you pay attention to this huge experience on the screen and .{LEFTBRACK}TH{RITEBRACK}. {LEFTBRACK}TH{RITEBRACK}. give yourself over to it.

"That lends itself for a kind of religious experience, seeing yourself as less than this magnificent presence on screen. So you can be really in awe of what you see."

The new gods, the ones who consistently inspire awe today, include Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts and Denzel Washington.

The aging gods, the ones whose films used to spark adoration, include Jack Nicholson, Meryl Streep, Robert De Niro, Clint Eastwood, Sidney Poitier, Sean Connery, Susan Sarandon, Mel Gibson and Schwarzenegger.

On screen, Schwarzenegger "inspires us to (achieve) a loftier plane of existence, one that thrills and stimulates," Burke says. "The bad part is we let it go at that. We don't do anything in our own lives to be Schwarzenegger ourselves. We keep looking to Schwarzenegger to solve our needs. .{LEFTBRACK}TH{RITEBRACK}. {LEFTBRACK}TH{RITEBRACK}."

Role-playing

The roles Schwarzenegger and the others play on screen fuel the mythological status they attain in our eyes.

"(Choice of roles) is critical, because that's where we transform them, as they transform themselves, into larger-than-life presences," Burke says.

Schwarzenegger first became a media character as result of the 1977 bodybuilding documentary "Pumping Iron."

He made himself into a screen legend by playing Conan the Barbarian and a wide variety of action-adventure characters. "We certainly know it's Arnold playing those roles," Burke says. "But now Arnold is taking on the persona of somebody else. And that somebody else can be much, much grander because of a combination of script, special effects, a satisfying ending - all kinds of things where fiction trumps real life."

Another kind of god-building centers around characters who triumph over a conflict by undergoing a heroic transformation.

Call it a personal-growth part, and match it to the characters Julia Roberts plays in "Erin Brockovich" and, to some extent, "Pretty Woman."

Creating the myths>{?

"When you see somebody's face 40 to 50 feet high on a screen, it creates an impact," says Paul Deragabedian, president of Exhibitor Relations Company, a box-office tracking firm. "Movies are illusions. Good filmmakers are magicians who are able to make things look better than they are."

Filmmakers, too, are movie gods, with many having lifestyles similar to the stars. Steven Spielberg sits atop Olympus today. Francis Ford Coppola, John Ford and Cecil B. DeMille ruled in their heyday.

These filmmakers know exactly how to present mythological situations that make their stars appear larger than life.

But the stars have to maintain the illusion, which is why so many are skilled in public relations.

The most famous, most successful and most well-known always try to put themselves in the best possible light. Even when they play a bad guy, as Hanks did in "Road to Perdition," you root for them, Deragabedian says. "The image is very calculated."

He lists Cruise as another best-light-possible character, whose roles in films such as "Top Gun" contribute to his image. When Cruise took on the part of Vietnam vet Ron Kovic in "Born on the Fourth of July," it was a departure, as is his portrayal of a hit man in the upcoming "Collateral."

People credit him for trying those risky ventures. Having the courage to do so fits his image.

Male vs. female

Male stars who aspire to Olympian status have to look good, be tough or a no-nonsense type, Deragabedian says.

Female stars have to radiate beauty and sex appeal.

Or at least they did in the past. The paradigm is shifting somewhat to reflect modern times.

Women can now shoot, kick, punch and duck with the best of the men. Witness Drew Barrymore, Lucy Liu and Cameron Diaz in "Charlie's Angels," Carrie-Anne Moss in the "Matrix" movies, Jennifer Garner in "Daredevil" and Halle Berry in the upcoming "Catwoman."

Now, female stars can be beautiful, sexy and, like their male counterparts, handle themselves in dangerous situations.

"They're not just being on the arm of a male action hero," Deragabedian says. "Women can now be action heroes, too, but they had better look damn good doing it."

Traditionally, action heroes get the most attention and, traditionally, action movies are a male stronghold.

"There is nothing more mythological than to see a movie idol on screen doing unbelievably heroic or physically expressive feats," he says. "With women, it's about more being funny and sexy and smart, that kind of thing. It's a different kind of myth."

Male gods dominate the pantheon because, the box-office specialist says, they are "just seen as so strong that even today's women look at them and want to be like them."

Or want to be with them.

Most male movie stars are paid more than their female counterparts. Fans put a value on that.

<-subtitle->The DVD effectsStars attain mythological status in the mind of the admirer, based solely on what the admirer sees on screen and in tabloids, and what he chooses to believe. Reality may not be a factor.

DVD extras shatter the illusion by doling out reality. Behind-the-scenes documentaries and featurettes expose the magic behind the movies: how they are shot, how stars get in shape, where they train - how stars are created in the movie process.

The exposure can humanize movie gods and deconstruct their myths.

In some instances, though, it can contribute to the myth.

Consider a Cruise feature on the "Mission: Impossible II" disc. The actor is shown hanging in the air off the side of a mountain. So you know it's actually Cruise doing the stunt and not a double.

"Then they say this guy could be a stunt guy if he wanted to," box-office specialist Deragabedian says. "That feeds into (the idea that) even behind the scenes, this guy isn't faking it."

A master at controlling his persona, Cruise knows exactly what he's doing with the DVD extra, Deragabedian says.

"Look at somebody like Vin Diesel," he continues. "Why do you think he shows those rippling muscles? That's his thing; he could kick your (butt)."

On the other hand, stars such as Kevin Spacey and Matt Damon convey brainy

personas rather than brawny ones.

For instance, in "Good Will Hunting" and "Rounders" Damon portrays a genius. "He creates this character who's smarter than you, stronger than you, better looking than you, and outside the theater, richer than you," Deragabedian says.

We respect that.

Living the myth

Film is myth.

Myth, according to Mills College's Burke, is "a reframing of ordinary life into something more satisfying."

We use film as a means of understanding our lives, so we often come back to certain movies - "It's a Wonderful Life," "Casablanca" - and their stars for repeated viewings.

Recognizing those stars as mythical figures gives us "some reassurance that there is something bigger than us, so that our lives can have some form of meaning, so we don't feel alone in a cold, dark universe," Burke says.

It gives us some assurance that there is a higher plane of existence than the one we currently occupy.

And if, like the ancient Greek gods, the movie gods who reside there let the pressure of being godlike get to them, so be it.

"There's an unacknowledged security for many of us in knowing we don't have to live up to such standards and face such constant scrutiny ourselves," Burke says. "(Movie gods) are the ones that have the glory - and the responsibility."

And more power to them.

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Here's a sampling of the pantheons of movie gods and goddesses:

Old gods

Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Francis X. Bushman, Cecil B. DeMille, Greer Garson, Ronald Colman, Shirley Temple, Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, Errol Flynn, John Garfield, James Stewart, Gary Cooper, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Cary Grant, Billy Wilder, John Ford, John Wayne, Lana Turner, Marilyn Monroe, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, James Dean, Gregory Peck, Charlton Heston, Paul Newman, Henry Fonda, Steve McQueen, Audrey Hepburn, Peter Sellers, Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole, Marlon Brando, Frank Capra, Dorothy Dandridge, Grace Kelly, Michael Curtiz, Howard Hawks, Robert Mitchum, John Huston, Stanley Kubrick, Burt Lancaster, Sam Peckinpah, George Stevens, Raoul Walsh and Alfred Hitchcock.

Aging gods

Jack Nicholson, Meryl Streep, Sidney Poitier, Diane Keaton, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, Robert De Niro, Robert Redford, Paul Newman, Woody Allen, Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson, Spike Lee, Robert Altman, Mel Gibson, Kevin Costner, Laurence Fishburne, Sean Connery, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Susan Sarandon, Mike Nichols, Shirley MacLaine, Meg Ryan and Hugh Grant.

New gods

Tom Hanks, Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts, Steven Spielberg, Denzel Washington, Nicolas Cage, Sean Penn and Russell Crowe.

Up-and-coming gods

Halle Berry, Jim Carrey, Reese Witherspoon, Will Smith, Charlize Theron, Will Ferrell, Nicole Kidman and Gwyneth Paltrow.



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