Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 18 | Issue 1 Article 41

3-31-2014

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Recommended Citation
Nail, Brian W. (2014) "Closing the Loop: "The Promise and Threat of the Sacred" in Rian Johnson's Looper," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 41.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/41

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Closing the Loop: "The Promise and Threat of the Sacred" in Rian Johnson's Looper

Abstract
This article examines the ways in which Rian Johnson's recent film *Looper* (2012) portrays the complex relationship between violence and the sacred in contemporary society through its exploration of the theme of retribution. Utilizing René Girard's theory of sacrifice and Roberto Esposito's explication of the immunitary logic of the sacred, this study argues that the film reveals the double nature of the sacred as a source of both life and death within society. Through an examination of crucial elements of *Looper's* plot and setting, and in particular its enigmatic climax, I argue that as a religious film, *Looper* challenges its audience to critically reflect upon the potential for violence that lies at the heart of society's most deeply held sacred commitments. Consequently, the film acknowledges what the theologian Gordon Lynch describes as "the inextricable promise and threat of the sacred."

Keywords
René Girard, Roberto Esposito, violence, sacred, American cinema, sacrifice

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This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/41

I. Introduction

Rian Johnson's recent film *Looper* portrays the complex relationship between violence and the sacred in contemporary society through its exploration of the question of whether or not retribution is an effective way of preserving life.[1] In contrast to more conventional science fiction films, which often focus on the technicalities and conflicts that emerge from the technology of time-travel itself, *Looper* employs time-travel in order to create a non-linear plotline that vividly portrays the cyclical nature of violence. According to Johnson, the film not only to draws into question the use of violence as a moral issue, it also explores "the practical issues of fixing a problem by finding the right person and killing them, fixing a problem through violence, a live-by-the-sword type thing [.]"[2] Set in the middle of the twenty-first century, *Looper* takes place in a dystopian world where criminal organizations utilize time-travel to kill people by sending them back in time to be shot by a group of hired gunmen called "loopers." The film's protagonist is a looper named Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), and its central conflict consists of his struggle to save a young boy with telepathic powers named Cid and his mother, Sara (Emily Blunt), from being killed by Joe's future self.

After escaping from his own execution, old Joe (Bruce Willis) confronts his younger self in a diner on the outskirts of Kansas City. Old Joe is determined to find and kill a crime boss named the Rainmaker. Described as a "holy-terror," the Rainmaker is an enigmatic figure who, according to old Joe,

takes control of the world's major criminal organizations and subsequently begins capturing and killing loopers. In the process of being apprehended by the Rainmaker's henchmen, Joe's wife is killed. Old Joe has travelled back in time to kill the child who will one day become the Rainmaker in an effort to save his wife by altering the past. Adding even greater moral complexity to the scenario, old Joe does not know the precise identity and whereabouts of the young Rainmaker. But he has obtained the birth records for three children, only one of whom is thought to be the actual Rainmaker. As a result, old Joe commits himself to the horrific task of finding and killing all three children in order to save his wife and himself from being attacked in the future.

The film's climactic ending comes when young Joe confronts his future self in a final violent struggle to save Cid, who is the final remaining child. As old Joe stands with his pistol drawn on Sara, the scene is momentarily interrupted by a proleptic vision in which young Joe claims to see the boy's future transformation from a bereaved and embittered child into a violent adult take place, thus becoming part of the seemingly endless circle of violence and revenge which the film so effectively portrays. Young Joe attempts to prevent Cid from becoming part of this cycle or loop by shooting himself, an action that simultaneously ends Joe's life and forecloses the possibility of the harmonious marriage that old Joe desperately seeks to preserve.

Looper's ending does not offer its audience an unambiguous solution to the problem of violent retribution. Instead, as I argue in this paper, the film

may be interpreted as a fictional narratization of René Girard's apprehension that human sociality is paradoxically created through and endangered by acts of sacred violence that nevertheless threaten to break free of their ritual confines. Expanding upon Girard's explication of the relationship between violence and the sacred, Roberto Esposito argues that religious and secular manifestations of the sacred demonstrate an immunitary logic by seeking to preserve "life through the absorption of something that binds it to its opposite, that draws life from death or includes death in life[.]"[3] In this study, I have chosen to interpret *Looper* through the framework of Esposito's explanation of the paradoxical logic of immunity because the film intuits what he describes as the double character of the sacred as simultaneously a source of both life and death. *Looper* broaches this difficult recognition in the way that it portrays a morally and psychologically vexed hero who is uneasy with his murderous actions (he is a hired killer) in relation to the seemingly intractable problem of reciprocal violence, the kind of violence that incites further acts of violence in an intensifying cycle of vengeance thus threatening the very possibility of a group or society's continued collective existence. Insofar as it represents this potentially catastrophic violence in terms of a paradoxically self-perpetuating "loop" personified in the figure of the film's titular "loopers," assassins who are initiated into a social group which provides them with a vital source of livelihood under the ominous provision that they consent to one day destroying their future selves, the film thereby glimpses the "generativity" of

violence, the terrifying promise contained within the immunitary logic of the sacred.

The underlying question that motivates *Looper's* plot is whether or not the use of violence is an effective means of protecting that which is sacred from the threat of transgression, injury, or death.[4] According to Gordon Lynch, the sacred may be defined as that which exercises "an unquestionable moral claim over the conduct of social life, the breach of which elicits a powerful response."[5] The sacred consequently bears both an implicit and oftentimes explicit connection to violence because its very presence is delimited by a requisite desire to protect it from being destroyed, tainted or otherwise transgressed by an external agent or aggressor that is perceived to be profane. Therefore, following Emile Durkheim's understanding of the foundational role of the sacred in society, Lynch suggests that it is a creative as well as a potentially destructive force, and therefore we must persistently face what he describes as "the inextricable promise and threat of the sacred."[6]

In light of Lynch's description of the powerful responses that humans display when the sacred forms that serve as the basis of their life are threatened, Johnson's film may be viewed as challenging its audience to reflect upon the potential for violence which is embedded within their own sacred passions and moral commitments. Therefore, *Looper* accomplishes in an especially powerful way what films in general are able to do—namely, perform the religious function of recreating the world.[7] As religious expressions, films are involved in a two-fold activity of representing and

simultaneously reconstructing society's notions of the sacred. In *Looper*, the dramatic conflicts, as well as the objects and relationships which give rise to them, artistically but nevertheless symptomatically repeat prevailing notions of the sacred. Although popular films are capable of drawing into question the prevailing notions of the sacred which form the basis of society's most deeply held moral convictions, they ultimately operate within the domain of narratological and cinematographic codes that are to a certain extent culturally determined.[8] The success with which Johnson's representations of the sacred motivate viewers to question the relationship between violence and the sacred depends largely upon the ways that the film's climax, and in particular young Joe's self-inflicted death, is interpreted.

This article argues that when it is viewed through the framework of Esposito's explanation of the immunitary logic of the sacred, young Joe's death does not appear as an instance of self-sacrifice that signals a profound reconfiguration of his moral commitments. Instead, the confrontation between young Joe and his future self is a manifestation of what Esposito describes as an autoimmune disease in which the urge to violently protect that which is sacred "is so great that at a certain point it turns against itself as a real and symbolic catastrophe leading to the implosion of the entire organism."[9] By bringing into focus the promise and threat of the sacred, *Looper* provides its audience with an opportunity to critically reflect upon the ways that violence is inextricably linked to the notions of the sacred which form the basis of society's most prevalent moral commitments. Most importantly, by revealing

the promise and threat of the sacred, it challenges its audience to recognize the immense capacity for violence that lies waiting in the heart of all those who would seek to protect that which is sacred.

II. The Contagion of Violence

The major conflicts in *Looper* come about as a result of each of the main characters' efforts to protect the people and material objects that they hold sacred. For both young Joe and old Joe, these efforts—which they never thematize as safeguarding the sacred as such—entail sacrificing the lives or interests of others. When faced with the inevitability of his own death, old Joe chooses to continue sacrificing others in an effort to save his wife and extend for however long his own life. Likewise, young Joe decides to let his best friend Seth be apprehended and killed in order to secure his own monetary interests. Although they each choose different approaches to sacrifice, their actions demonstrate the extent to which violence remains the raw force which demarcates the domain of the sacred in the film. As a result, the film portrays the link between the seemingly intractable problem of violence and the human propensity for upholding deep emotional and psychological commitments to sacred forms that, when transgressed, have the potential to give rise to aggression. The work of René Girard represents one of contemporary scholarship's most intensive examinations of the complex relationship between violence and the sacred. Girard's highly influential work on sacrifice

has elucidated the ways that violence spreads throughout a society and the crucial role which the sacred plays in society's efforts to contain it. Expanding upon Girard's work, and in particular elaborating upon the language of contagion which he uses to describe the spread of violence, Roberto Esposito investigates the enigmatic nature of the sacred in relation to the bio-medical principle of immunization. In this section, I will utilize aspects of Girard's theory of sacrifice to explain the state of social and moral decay which has taken hold of the dystopian world of the film. In the following section, I will interpret two crucial moments in the film, scenes in which young Joe and old Joe must make decisions that may be regarded as sacrificial, through the framework of Esposito's examination of the immunitary logic of the sacred.

In the opening chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard asserts, "The secret dual nature of violence still eludes men. Beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence, and the former continually promoted at the expense of the latter."[10] According to Girard, harmful violence is transformed into beneficial violence through the invention of sacred rituals that simultaneously provide an institutional outlet for otherwise destructive acts of aggression while also serving to memorialize these acts of violence as a source of vitality and peace within a community. In primitive societies, the ritual killing of a sacrificial victim or scapegoat became the primary means of maintaining peace within a community. Although such sacrificial rituals have largely disappeared, Girard suggests that in modern societies "the judicial system and the institution of sacrifice share the same function, but the judicial

system is infinitely more effective."[11] In fact, he claims that the modern judicial system is so effective at transforming destructive violence into beneficial violence that modern societies no longer associate its sacrificial function with the supposedly archaic violence of ancient religion. The sacrificial logic of the judicial system is contained within a legal apparatus that conceals its violence from view.[12]

In *Looper* the relationship between violence and the sacred is unobscured by the presence of a modern judicial system. Although the film is clearly a work of science fiction, it challenges its audience to view its dystopian setting as an exaggerated but nonetheless realistic portrayal of the violence which paradoxically underwrites society's efforts to safeguard life. In a world where criminals are in fact the only authority, the violence, which is otherwise disguised or obscured within a society committed to the rule of law, is revealed as the underlying force that paradoxically sustains life by threatening to destroy it. For reasons that are not explained directly in the film, in the year 2044, Kansas City is in a state of social and economic decay. In the opening scenes, Joe recklessly drives a sports car through the ruinous city. The streets are lined with tents and makeshift shelters for large numbers of homeless or transient people. As he accelerates past a converted school bus, a man runs into the street and scoops up a suitcase lying on the ground. The man runs away with the suitcase, the owner of the bus casually shoulders a shotgun and shoots the fleeing man in the back. This shooting establishes the violent and chaotic atmosphere within which much of the film's early scenes take

place. Although the city is consumed by violence, theft, drug-use and prostitution, some basic form of social order is maintained by a hammer wielding crime-boss named Abe. After being sent back from the future by a large criminal organization to oversee the loopers, Abe organizes another group of hired killers called "the Gat Men" who are responsible for administrating and controlling the criminal activities that take place throughout the city.

Abe's authority extends in two seemingly opposing directions: on the one hand, he oversees criminal activity which presumably destroys peace and order in society, but on the other hand, having obtained a monopoly on violence which underwrites the coercive force of the law,[13] Abe is the embodiment of a legal authority which maintains social harmony through the threat of violence. The fact that Abe keeps a hammer rather than a judge's gavel at his side highlights the extent to which he functions as a sort of pre-modern or primitive judge whose authority to make life and death decisions derives not from the power of written law but rather from his high-ranking position in the criminal world. Moreover, if Abe's name is traced back to its biblical origins, then the film also presents him as a father figure to the many metaphorical sons who are subjected to his seemingly omnipotent control. Like the biblical patriarch, Abe is not only the father of many sons (all of the loopers that appear directly in the film are young men) but most importantly he is the father of sacrifice—he is the chief overseer of the ritualistic acts of killing carried out by the loopers. The industry of killing which Abe

administrates, the assassination and disposal of humans sent back from the future, is described by young Joe as a kind of cleansing or purification of "the future's garbage." Joe states that when a victim is sent back in time to be killed, "I do the necessaries. Collect my silver. So the target is vanished from the future, and I've just disposed of a body that technically does not exist." Dropping the body into a furnace, he suggests that the process is "Clean."

Joe's description of his vocation and the visual imagery of burning that accompanies his narration reflects what Girard theorizes as the purgative effects of sacrificial violence within society. Equating sacrifice with criminal violence, Girard argues that "If sacrifice resembles criminal violence, we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice [.]"[14] Modern judicial systems maintain a delicate balance between the impure violence of personal reprisal and the purifying violence of ritual scapegoating.[15] When the difference between impure violence and purifying violence disappears, a sacrificial crisis emerges, and violence threatens to break free from its ritualistic constraints. Girard's theory of the sacrificial crisis provides an effective framework for interpreting the violence that has enveloped the dystopian future portrayed in *Looper*. One of Abe's primary responsibilities is to ensure that loopers execute themselves after they reach the end of their contracts. If a looper does not shoot his future self, it is called "letting your loop run." The consequences for letting your loop run are not directly explained. Joe simply states that "It's not a good thing." The film does not represent the effects of "letting your loop run" in relation to

some fictional rules governing the dynamics of time-travel; instead the situation is portrayed as a challenge to the unwritten code that governs the life of a looper. When Joe's best friend Seth lets his loop run in the early part of the film, Abe takes aggressive action to apprehend Seth's future self by torturing and dismembering him. Abe's actions reflect the coercive force through which the law, in its originary form, seeks to contain violence by channeling it into certain ritual contexts. Just as Abe occupies semi-transcendent status (he is a man from the future who has been appointed to oversee the loopers), Girard claims that in modern legal systems "The judicial authority is beholden to no one. It is thus at the disposal of everyone, and it is universally respected. The judicial system never hesitates to confront violence head on, because it possesses a monopoly on the means of revenge."[16] By controlling the loopers and the Gat Men, Abe takes on the authority of a judge and a criminal overlord. This mixing of the supposedly purifying violence of the law with the destructive internal violence of reprisal brings about a sacrificial crisis in which acts of reciprocal violence spread throughout the entire community. The dystopian world of *Looper* has been enveloped by just such a crisis. In Girardian terms, the contagion of violence has taken hold in the world of *Looper* so fiercely that it can no longer be contained by any ritualistic or institutional authority. As the tainted source of legal order in the city, Abe is incapable of maintaining complete control of the violence which he is responsible for perpetuating.

III. Immunization and the Sacred

Although Girard's theory of sacrifice provides an effective framework for understanding how the contagion of violence takes hold of nearly every aspect of life in the film, in order to explore the forces that motivate old Joe and young Joe to commit themselves to profound acts of violence, it is necessary to examine the ways that their sacred commitments are circumscribed by a sacrificial logic that underlies the very pursuit of life itself. Expanding upon Girard's theory of scapegoating as a form of ritual purification, Esposito asserts that the language of immunization is essential to understanding the paradoxical function of the sacred as simultaneously a source of both life and death. According to Esposito the concept of immunization is a crucial hermeneutic key to interpreting the function of religion and the law. Through an analysis of the work of modern scholars such as Girard, Simone Weil, and Walter Benjamin, Esposito concludes that in their critique of the relationship between law and its coercive power, all of these thinkers intuit the immunitary logic which presides over western society's understanding of the alleviatory function of religion and the law. Throughout history, the function of the law has been to promote social harmony by protecting communities from the threat of violent conflict; therefore, the law has a dual purpose—to protect life and to promote social harmony. The immunitary process, which encompasses the various legal and political activities of a community, must pursue this objective by incorporating within itself some aspects of the threat that it seeks

to prevent—he notes that the immunitary process "can prolong life, but only by continuously giving it a taste of death."[17] Thus, the law has a negative or more specifically violent side which is necessarily linked to its positive role within society as a means of sustaining or protecting life. Consequently, Esposito claims

> That law is essential for protecting all types of shared life from the conflicts that traverse them does not detract from the core of violence that the law brings with it, lodged squarely at its origins but also at the very heart of its process. As was expressly stated in the ancient definition of the first *nomos*—which was sovereign over life *and* death—law is located at the point of indistinction between the preservation and exclusion of life.[18]

Religion also demonstrates the immunitary logic that characterizes the dual function of the law. Once more Esposito identifies "two prevailing vectors of meaning that are present from the time of its (religion's) origins: one is salvific—in the biological sense of something that is healthy or keeps healthy—and the other is normative in character."[19] His use of the term "normative" here may be understood in relation to the religious belief that survival depends upon "the performance of a ritual, but also on the observance of a prohibition, which must not be violated."[20] From an anthropological and philosophical perspective, the law and religion stem from a common source—the institution and subsequent observance of a prohibition. Religious and juridical prohibitions or taboos are fundamentally linked to the sacred, a notion which many modern scholars considered to be the enigmatic basis for practically all of the activities which constitute social life. For Girard, the sacred is synonymous with the sacrificial violence that gives rise to human

sociality. Similarly, Esposito's examination of the sacred is part of a larger effort to explain the ways that violence operates sociologically as a force that simultaneously destroys and preserves life. But in contrast to Girard, who ultimately looks to Christianity as a way of escaping the cycle of reciprocal violence perpetuated through the practice of scapegoating,[21] Esposito considers violence to be inseparable from the logic of immunization which characterizes both religion and the law, each of which share a common origin in notions of the sacred. As a result, violence cannot be avoided simply through rejecting the practice of scapegoating.

Beginning with Jacques Derrida's assertion that the seemingly modern biomedical notion of immunity has its origins in the semantics of religion,[22] Esposito returns to Emile Benveniste's etymological studies on the concept of the sacred, and in particular he focuses his attention on the Latin words *sacer* (sacred) and *sanctus* (holy) along with pairs of Greek and Avestic terms which, although not precisely equivalent, have similar religious connotations. He suggests that "On the one hand, the sacred signifies a state of fullness as well as vital expansion that is bestowed on the person."[23] It is a source of blessing which provides divine protection from illness or disease. But in contrast to this positive connotation, the sacred also has a negative side: "The Greek *hagios* and the Latin *sanctus* . . . and, finally, the Avestic *yaožḍāta*, allude to something that is forbidden to human contact, and in broader terms, to the law sanctioning this separation."[24] Although he states that "the sacred bifurcates into two horizons of meaning—one type primarily organic, and the

other basically juridical," Esposito asserts that the two meanings can be reconciled by interpreting them in relation to the principle of immunization—its negative aspect, "the prohibition, the interdiction, the law—is not only the opposite of the affirmative, the expansive, or the vital; rather it is its very condition of existence. The negative is the point of resistance that allows life to last, as long as it submits to that which protects it. It is the limit, the order, the law by which life can remain as it is, only by bending itself to the power that goes beyond it."[25]

The two horizons of meaning which constitute the juridical as well the religious connotations of the sacred can be schematized in the form of a loop whose two ends, the seemingly divergent trajectories of life and death, salvation and violence, converge in the act of sacrifice or sacralization which according to Esposito "involves crossing over a threshold of indistinguishability between the preservation of life and the production of death [.]"[26] In *Looper*, the paradoxical relationship between the negative or violent force of the sacred and its positive, life-preserving effects is personified in the figure of the loopers themselves, who are only freed from their careers as assassins when they kill their future selves. The contractual obligation that loopers kill themselves at the end of their careers may be interpreted as a kind of hyperbolic articulation of the idiom, "Live by the sword. Die by the sword." A moralistic response to this scenario may suggest that the punishment in the end fits the crime. However, the film goes to great lengths in order to demonstrate that the loopers are themselves caught up in a

much wider network of criminal activity that essentially encompasses the entire world that they inhabit. Acts of violence are not exceptional within the world of *Looper*. On the contrary, in a society enveloped by crime and corruption, where money equates to power and security, violence appears to be the most effective way of securing an individual's own interests. Suffering under the psychological burden of knowing that they will one day be forced to execute their future selves, loopers typically choose to live a life that is motivated by what may be considered a radical form of economic self-interest. Young Joe is a cinematic representation of the modern figure of *homo economicus*—a rational maximizer of satisfaction in a world where survival depends upon how effectively he is able to economize the costs of existence by sacrificing the lives and interests of others. [27] However, the film reveals the dilemmas that arise from this approach to life by showing the extent to which an uncritical commitment to pursuing his self-interest only exacerbates the painful isolation that compels his self-destructive lifestyle.

Joe's pursuit of self-interest operates as an extension of the immunitary logic which compels him to respond aggressively to every possible threat to his own future and the sacred forms which he believes will provide him with both protection and happiness. Although the function of any immune system would seemingly be to safeguard an individual from being harmed by an external agent, Esposito suggests that the violent urge to protect can become so strong in an individual body that it can develop into an autoimmune disease which directs the body's aggressive resistance onto itself. The consequences of

such a disease are catastrophic because "This is not about losing a war against an unstoppable opponent, or even strictly speaking, about a real war—a *polemos* between two opposing forces battling against each other for dominance; rather this is a *stasis*: a force that turns against its own essence, causing the destruction of everything that surrounds it and, ultimately itself [.]"[28] Joe's tortured yet unfailing commitment to pursuing his own self-interest sets him on a trajectory of self-destruction that culminates in the film's dramatic climax.

According to the film's director, Joe's character was partly inspired by *Casablanca's* hardboiled antihero Rick Blaine, whose professed personal philosophy, as Johnson suggests, could be summed up in the line, "I stick my neck out for nobody."[29] Like Blaine, young Joe demonstrates a conflicted but nonetheless persistent commitment to pursuing his own self-interest, even if it means sacrificing his only friend.[30] Early in the film, Joe is forced to make a decision between securing his own financial interests or attempting to save the life of his friend Seth. Having let his loop run, Seth seeks out Joe's help and takes refuge in a floor safe hidden beneath a rug in his apartment. The safe contains the gold bars that Joe has been saving to fund his move to France when his loop has been closed. Joe's safe functions as a reliquary for the sacred objects which he believes will enable him to escape from the hardships of his present life—the safe is Joe's *sanctum*, the breach of which elicits a powerful response. By hiding Seth inside of this sacred space, the film sets the stage for the sacrificial dilemma that Joe must face when confronted by Abe.

The Gat Men come to Joe's apartment in search of Seth; they take Joe to speak with Abe in person, and he offers Joe the following deal:

> I think if you ask yourself, if you ask, who would I sacrifice for what's mine, I think Seth would be deep and cozy inside that circle. And I'll show you how much I know you. I'm not even gonna break you, I'm just gonna set you back a ways. Now we know that you've been stashing half your bars. Which is smart, no law against it. You're gonna get out, you're gonna go overseas. . . .You give him up, or you give us half your stash. You're willing to dump your silver in the dirt for Seth?

Unwilling to give up his earnings, young Joe decides to hand over his friend in exchange for the money that he hopes will one day buy him happiness. But there is of course a certain sense of tragic irony to Joe's decision because in order to obtain his final big payoff, he will have to kill himself—so the money is simultaneously a blessing and a curse. It is the *pharmakon* within which the two meanings of the sacred converge.[31] On the one hand, the silver bars are the sacred objects that Joe perceives to be his sole source of salvation and means of escape from the life of a hired killer; and on the other hand, it is blood money whose value is measured not only in relation to the numerous unnamed victims who Joe has killed during his career, but it is also the purchase price of his own life and now the life of his best friend. And finally there is Seth himself; as Abe's comments suggest, he is set apart, made sacred, "deep and cozy inside that circle" that isolates him as the sacrificial scapegoat whose death temporarily establishes peace between two adversaries.

Although it may be tempting to interpret young Joe's relationship to Sara and Cid in the latter half of the film as the beginning of his turn away

from a life of self-interest, his actual motivations for staying close to the family are ambiguous. When Sara warns Cid to keep his distance from young Joe, the boy asks his mother, “Is he not good?” And she replies skeptically, “Well, we’re gonna see what he is.” Towards the end of the film, young Joe and Cid are forced to hide in an underground shelter as one of the Gat Men interrogates Sara inside the farmhouse. As they wait for the henchman to finish his search of the farmhouse, Cid asks Joe about his mother. After describing the details of his childhood and the loss of his mother, Joe explains how he became a looper, saying to Cid, “A man in the city found me, put a gun in my hand, gave me something that was mine. It’s just men trying to figure out what they would do to keep what’s theirs. What they got. That’s the only kind of man there is.” It is clear that young Joe is uneasy with this utilitarian conception of manhood, but up to the very end, it remains uncertain as to whether or not he is capable of breaking the pattern of violence that has accompanied his self-interested approach to life.

If young Joe’s decision to sacrifice his best friend for the sake of protecting his own interests reveals the extent to which violence serves to safeguard that which is most sacred to him, then likewise, old Joe’s quest to save himself and his wife by killing the Rainmaker also blurs the lines between the preservation and destruction of life. In seeking to prevent a future act of violence from taking place by finding the infant Rainmaker and killing him, old Joe attempts to safeguard, or in Esposito’s terms immunize, his future life from the threat of death. Joe’s use of time-travel to carry out a preemptive

act of reprisal in order to prevent the shooting of his wife may be interpreted in terms of what Walter Benjamin describes as "the mythical core of the law," which "consists in violently retracing any moment in historical development back to its initial stage, in crushing the entire history into the tracing of its nonhistoric origin."[32] By revisiting and subsequently legitimating the violence upon which it was founded, the law attempts to secure "the present in the face of the uncertainty that bears down on it from the future."[33] According to Esposito, the law can only perform its immunitary function by imposing itself upon a future that has not already occurred. In this way the law attempts to violently subdue life in the future through the application of force in the present:

> Something is a law if it is able to prevent any event that can possibly take place, any accident that can go beyond it. Only in this way—by legislating on what still evades its control—can it immunize against becoming: it does so by making *becoming* into a "state," a "given," an "already-become". . . The law holds every "maybe" in the iron grip of the "already" and the "still," the "forever thus" and the "thus forever."[34]

Bearing the burden of a future that he presumes to be already determined, old Joe attempts to prevent the event of his wife's death from coming to pass by foreclosing the future of the infant Rainmaker. However, as the structure of the film's plot evinces, time and history do not conform to any such linear schematization. The violence that old Joe pursues in order to preserve his conception of the present has a fragmenting rather than a unifying effect within the film. By travelling back in time and thwarting his own execution,

old Joe creates alternative trajectories in time that place the eventuality of meeting his future wife into question. Whether or not he is aware of this fragmentation of time, old Joe remains committed to his infanticidal mission because he perceives it to be the only way of protecting what is most sacred to him—his marriage. When he confronts his younger self at a diner in the early part of the film, the sacrality of old Joe's marriage is demonstrated through the language of purification that he uses in order to describe to young Joe how his wife's love has rescued him from a life of solitude and drug addiction:

> Let's take a look at your life. You're a killer. You're a junkie. And a fucking child mentality, 'What's mine, my life.' Save your life, you're asking me how? The question is why. Why would someone sacrifice their life? Why would someone waste themselves? . . . You're so self-absorbed and stupid. She's going to clean you up. . . . You're going to take her love like a sponge. And you think maybe I'm clear of the past. Maybe I'm safe.

As a form of the sacred, Joe views his wife as a source of physical and emotional salvation; consequently, he is prepared to employ any means of violence necessary to protect her from the threat of harm. Old Joe keeps a picture of his wife inside of an old-fashioned pocket watch, which functions totemistically as an object that symbolically connects him to his wife. Because she has already been killed in the future, he must struggle to keep his memory of her from being erased as he attempts to alter the past in order to save her life. Hiding in the city's underground sewer, old Joe contemplates the photo and repeats to himself, "The first time I saw her face," until her image comes clearly to his mind. He then turns to a map detailing the possible

locations of the Rainmaker and grasps his pistol. In terms of the technicalities of time travel, this scenario defies logical explanation. But as a moving portrayal of the passion that motivates old Joe to kill the Rainmaker, the scene demonstrates the extent to which Joe's love for his wife and his desire to prevent her death embolden him to commit the unspeakable crime of infanticide.

In his commentary on the film, Johnson notes that he felt some sense of trepidation over his decision to film the scene in which Bruce Willis' character murders one of the children suspected to be the Rainmaker.[35] The scene opens with a young boy arriving home alone. As he removes a house key hidden beneath a mat, old Joe approaches silently from a garden path, their eyes meet, and the camera focuses in on Joe's gun as the sound of a single shot fills the silence. Old Joe is then shown staggering away from the house. Visibly distraught, he passes from the afternoon light into the shadow of a highway overpass, he weeps as he recalls the memory of lying in bed with his wife, and he collapses to the ground. His wedding ring, another form of totem, is clearly visible as he raises a hand to wipe the tears from his eyes. Reflecting on this scene, Johnson suggests that he was surprised that audiences did not express any strong objections to it in test screenings. He speculates that Willis' performance and the overwhelming sense of guilt that he evokes may have provided the necessary dramatic counterpoint to the murder of the child.

However, another possible explanation for the audience's reception of the scene may be that Johnson spends a great deal of time establishing old

Joe's motivation, which is to prevent his wife from being killed in the future. Moreover, in contrast to the killing of the child, which takes place off-screen, the audience is given full access to the moment that Joe's wife is killed; in that scene the camera focuses in on the woman's blood as it pours from her stomach onto her white shirt and then cuts to Joe's grief stricken face as he watches the killers drag her body into their home. The fact that the director chose not to portray the scene of infanticide in the same direct manner as other violent moments in the film could simply be considered an example of aesthetic propriety. As Johnson's comments suggest, he was admittedly concerned that this scene would prove too controversial for audiences as well as film censors. The portrayal of infanticide in popular film is itself a complex and expansive issue, and so for the moment, I will simply argue that the audience's surprising response to this scene and the director's choice to portray the killing off-screen may each be linked to a more widespread cultural resistance to acknowledging the sacrificial, and in this case infanticidal, violence which is bound up with the sacred.[36] In *Looper*, acts of infanticide, which would otherwise be considered controversial, pass by unremarked because they take place against the backdrop of a sacred commitment that is thoroughly embedded within contemporary society—the putative or presumptive sacrality of the family.[37] As Lynch suggests, the urge to protect what is sacred can be so overwhelming that it is often difficult to "recognize the harm that is done in seeking to fight and destroy the profane."[38] Because according to Lynch,

> The moral imperative of this action is so strong that those who suffer or die as a result of it . . . cannot really be recognized as meaningful losses. To do so would be to begin to question the unquestionable: to raise the prospect that the acting out of our sacred impulses does not, in itself, produce good outcomes. Facing such a moral paradox is too hard for most people[39]

And this is precisely what Johnson accomplishes by linking the scene of infanticide to Joe's desire to save his wife. The moral paradox that forms the basis of this scene's dramatic power is articulated even more powerfully in the film's climax.

Thus far, I have argued that the film's major conflicts revolve around situations in which young Joe and old Joe must each choose between protecting their own interests by sacrificing the lives of others, or sacrificing themselves in order to save the life of another. By choosing to pursue their own self-interest in order to safeguard their own futures, old Joe and young Joe each remain committed to exercising the violent force that is bound up with the immunitary logic of the sacred. However, the tide of violence which they are willing to unleash upon individuals who stand in between them and the futures that they hope to secure ultimately threatens to double-back upon them in a wave of still greater violence. Esposito theorizes this amplified resurgence of violence in terms of an autoimmune disease in which "the warring potential of the immune system" can become so intense "that at a certain point it turns against itself as a real and symbolic catastrophe leading to the implosion of the entire organism."[40] This real and symbolic catastrophe takes place in the confrontation between young Joe and his future self.

Crucially, in this scene, Joe's death (and here it is possible to speak of the singular death of a character who is nonetheless divided within space and time) is not brought about directly at the hands of one of his adversaries—instead, as instance of autoimmunity, it is a self-inflicted death that issues forth from the internal division which his quest for vengeance has created.

In the closing scenes of the film, old Joe chases Sara and Cid to the edge of a cane field. He fires his pistol and the bullet grazes Cid's cheek, the boy's anger erupts, and through the power of telekinesis he lifts old Joe and Sara, who is positioned in between the boy and his assailant, into the air. As Cid's anger rises and threatens to destroy his mother and old Joe, Sara looks into her son's eyes and gently convinces him to let his anger subside. The boy begins to weep and his telekinetic hold over them is released. Undaunted, old Joe continues his pursuit, and as Cid retreats into the cane, Sara stands steadfast between Cid and his assailant. In the instant before old Joe pulls the trigger, the voice of young Joe offers his own proleptic vision of the future: "Then I saw it. I saw a mom who would die for her son, a man who would kill for his wife, a boy angry and alone. Laid out in front of him the bad path, I saw it. And the path was a circle, round and round. So I changed it." He then points the blunderbuss at his chest and pulls the trigger. With his gun still pointed at Sara, old Joe stands dumbfounded for a moment and then disappears entirely from the scene. Cid emerges from the canebrake, his cheek bloodied, Sara carries him back to the farmhouse, and she dresses his wound.

At first glance, Young Joe's death appears to conform to a narrative pattern that persists throughout the history of literature and film. As a form of self-sacrifice, his decision to kill himself in order to prevent Sara from being killed may be understood as a supremely altruistic act that effectively resolves the film's major conflict. Utilizing Georges Bataille's understanding of ritual sacrifice as a transcendent experience in which the literal killing of a victim or the contemplation of violent images is perceived to be a means of reconciling the opposing forces of life and death, Claire Sisco King claims that this pattern of "sacrifice structures films across a variety of genres and subgenres, including war, action, horror, science fiction, and disaster films [.]"[41] In her discussion of films such as *Braveheart*, *Titanic*, and *I Am Legend*, King argues that the sacrificial death of the victim-hero is represented as a salvific act which redeems the historical traumas of the past by offering an illusion of narrative closure.[42] However, an interpretation of *Looper's* ending which perceives young Joe's death as a solution to the film's violent conflict risks oversimplifying the significant moral paradoxes that it poses.

Although it may be possible to interpret *Looper* as a sacrificial film, according to King's description, the film's climax nevertheless deploys a crucial variation upon the classic victim-hero protagonist which so many popular films take as their cinematic focal point. Despite the fact that young Joe and old Joe are in bitter conflict with one another throughout the film, it is nevertheless the case that they represent two versions of the same historical person. Therefore, Joe's character possesses a three-fold status—he is

simultaneously the victim, the hero, and the villain in the film. A reading that idealizes Joe's death by viewing it as a kind of redemptive sacrifice obstructs the recognition that his actions may indeed be considered a prime example of the dissolution of the self which takes place when the instinctive urge to protect the sacred gives way to an excess of violence that cannot be contained. In the film's final climactic scene of autoimmunity, there is no external enemy or adversary for young Joe to vent his aggression upon. In the figure of old Joe, the endpoint of the thread which represents the trajectory of young Joe's life bends itself backward upon him, and through a final act of violence, he seeks to end the circle of vengeance and reprisal that has defined his life by drawing the two ends of that thread together, and thus closing his own loop.

However, this act of self-destruction does not necessarily bring an end to the spiral of reciprocal violence that spans the temporal limits of the film, the origin of which is persistently displaced in two chronological directions: Joe's mythical past and his already fragmented future. Although countless popular films have predisposed the audience to interpret young Joe's death as a kind of Christ-like self-sacrifice,[43] his death alone does not represent a solution to the problem of violence in *Looper*. Cid and Sara each carry with them the physical and emotional scars of their violent encounter with the world of loopers. *Looper* offers no definitive answer to the question of whether or not Cid will grow up to be the Rainmaker—if indeed it is the case that such an apocalyptic figure existed in the first place. What the film's ending does suggest is that the sanctioned killing of the profane aggressor and

the idealized self-sacrifice of the victim-hero are each forms of violence that are always at risk of propagating still more violence to come, where what is to come is not the revelatory promise of salvation that issues forth from the sacred but a repetition of the apocalyptic threat to being from within being. Rather than seeking a solution to the problem of violence through the idealization of self-sacrifice, the more difficult task is to critically examine the passions that underwrite our commitments to sacred forms that exercise a non-contingent moral claim upon our lives. *Looper* thematizes this difficult task in the image of Sara chipping away at the remains of a tree stump whose lifeless roots stretch deep into the soil of everyday life.

As both an obstacle to human flourishing as well as a means of safeguarding the forms of the sacred which give meaning and direction to daily life, acts of aggression that threaten to destroy that which is considered to be profane appear to be an inevitable component of human life. *Looper* portrays the seemingly intractable nature of violence through the image of the mangled tree stump that resists complete destruction despite the fact that it is already in a state of decay. When Sara's character is introduced early in the film, she appears in the middle of an empty field, chopping away at the seemingly invulnerable vestiges of an ancient tree. Splinters and fragments of wood scatter with each forceful blow while the movement of the axe-handle simultaneously tears the flesh of her hands. In this image, it is possible to observe once more Esposito's insights into the paradoxical relationship between the protection and negation of life. As he notes, "Life is preserved by

its proximity to death, with death settled on the horizon of life."[44] In Sara's case, in order to protect herself and Cid, she is forced to internalize some portion of the expansive culture of violence that has enveloped the world which lies beyond the boundaries of her farm. Although Sara is arguably the character who is most committed to non-violence, she nevertheless demonstrates a certain awareness of the limits of her own moral convictions. When she first encounters Joe, she wields a shotgun that is loaded with rock-salt, an ammunition that is intended to maim rather than to kill. Nevertheless, she is willing to extend hospitality to Joe in exchange for his protection. Sara's approach to the threat of violence is in many ways a pragmatic one. In the latter half of the film, young Joe approaches Sara as she continues to chip away at the stump, and he inquires: "You can't take that thing out with a plow or something?" Sara responds ambivalently. The problem of violence, like the tree stump, is both complex and imposing, and it is resistant to any purely rationalistic or mechanistic extraction—it leaves a mark upon the very flesh of those who would seek to eliminate it. And as a result, it lives on, though perhaps in a diminished form.

As Richard Bernstein observes: "There is a protean quality about violence; it can take ever new forms. We cannot anticipate the ways in which violence will manifest itself in the course of history. Like Proteus, violence disguises and conceals itself."[45] Cid's telekinetic powers reflect the protean nature of violence which Bernstein describes. At times when he is frustrated, angry, and most importantly afraid, Cid's mental powers break free of his

rational control and threaten to destroy those who would seek to harm him as well as friends and family who are enveloped by his uncontrollable rage. Cid's passion may be understood in relation to what Hannah Arendt refers to as a "natural" propensity for violence that is essential to human nature. Arendt argues that "rage and the violence that sometimes—not always—goes with it belong among the 'natural' human emotions, and to cure man of them would mean nothing less than to dehumanize or emasculate him."[46] Inherited from his mother, Cid's telekinetic power is the result of genetic mutation. Consequently, Sara's task is to teach Cid how to control his telekinetic power and to find ways of limiting the power of his emotional responses to perceived threats; however, she cannot simply divest him of this tremendous power.

Sara's character performs what may be regarded as a didactic function not simply because she tries to teach Cid how to control his anger; she also offers an alternative model for thinking through the problem of violence and its complex relationship to manifestations of the sacred—in particular the sacred bonds that tie family members to one another. In the film's climax, Cid's rage threatens to destroy her as well as old Joe. Interposed between two deadly forces, Sara faces her son and affirms her love for him, an affirmation which causes his anger to subside. Thus she offers one possible response to the threat of violence. His cheek having already been wounded by a shot from old Joe's pistol, Sara's action encourages Cid, in the language of the New Testament command, to turn the other cheek and flee rather than to respond with still greater violence.[47] But next, by turning to face old Joe as he

continues his deadly pursuit, she stands firm in her opposition to a man who could only be described as her enemy in this moment. In this way, she comes to represent a living embodiment of the immunitary logic of religion and the law. Her presence marks the boundary between the sacred, her son for whom she is willing to die, and the profane aggressor, whose presence will be met with fierce resistance if he chooses to take another step closer. Consequently, her steadfast opposition is not itself a form of pacifism; like the law, the threat of violence is the fundamental force upon which her resistance is grounded. But with no recourse to a weapon, Sara commits herself to what may be described as a lesser violence, which, despite the fact that it remains caught up within a larger economy of violence, seeks to establish a boundary or threshold for containing the excess of aggression that results from the insatiable desire for retribution.[48]

IV. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that *Looper* offers a unique perspective on the relationship between violence and the sacred because it intuits that the double character of the sacred is manifest in the nature of violence as a force that both threatens and yet provides a means of founding human sociality. Utilizing Girard's theory of violence and Esposito's subsequent theorization of the immunitary logic of the sacred, I have argued that the violent conflicts in *Looper* arise from young Joe and old Joe's self-interested attempts to secure

their own futures by safeguarding the sacred forms which they perceive to be a source of salvation in their lives. However, these attempts at safeguarding the sacred entail committing acts of sacrificial violence which set in motion a cycle of vengeance and retribution which ultimately leads to Joe's self-destruction. In this way, the film demonstrates the extent to which the pursuit of retribution as a way of preserving or sustaining life leads to a contradictory outcome—namely, it has the potential to incite further acts of violence in an intensifying cycle of vengeance and vengeance avenged, that vengeance in turn begetting further revenge, thus threatening the very possibility of a group or society's continued collective existence.

Looper is an important film because its appearance in popular culture comes at a time, particularly in America, when contemporary society is struggling to cope with the emotional and moral consequences of violent acts that appear to spring from what could perhaps be described as the deep enigma of the human psyche. By representing its violent conflicts within the ritual space of the cinema, *Looper* constitutes its audience into a kind of sacred community and subsequently challenges that community on the one hand to critically reflect upon its own investment in forms of sanctioned violence and on the other hand to consider the limitations of an ideological commitment to non-violence. Although the influence of violent films upon society continues to be a topic of fierce debate, Jolyon Mitchell maintains that simply censoring violent films or encouraging religiously minded viewers to avoid portrayals of violence in popular media is far too simplistic. Instead, he argues that it is

necessary to develop the ability to critique and evaluate media violence in order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways that violence is manifested in contemporary society. However, in order to respond to the problem of violence, Mitchell claims that it is necessary to recontextualize the forms of violence memorialized and represented in popular media within Christian communities committed to peacemaking. He argues that "Learning the language of non-violence goes beyond simply developing the skills in cinematic or digital analysis to participation in small communities and truthful friendships, enriched through worship, where habits of non-violence and forgiveness can be witnessed, nurtured and embodied."[49] Although Mitchell's work clearly demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of film as an art form, his distinctly Christian response to the challenges posed by media violence underestimates the capacity for popular cinema to function as a sacred space that is nonetheless thoroughly embedded within an otherwise secularized culture. Thus, beyond the rather narrow confines of a Christian community, *Looper* may be regarded as a religious film that moves beyond a merely superficial interest in the spectacle of violence by motivating its audience to participate in a form of *askesis*,[50] a philosophical exercise which Lynch describes as "the pursuit of different kind of awareness of deeply felt moral emotions, the symbols, stories and images that evoke them, and the practices that keep them alive. It seeks to create a gap, however slight between the experience of sacred sentiment and the unthought impulse to accept this as fundamental truth or obligatory grounds for action."[51] According to Lynch

such an *askesis* "seeks not to rid us of the capacity for experiencing sacred forms, but to create a new dynamic in this experience, another current that moves in relation to the tides of moral emotion that sweep through social life."[52] By situating its exploration of the problem of violent reprisal within the context of one of contemporary society's most prevalent sacred forms, the family, *Looper* reveals the extent to which the boundary between love and violent passion, sacrifice and murder, is delimited by the feint lines of popular moral sentiment and the social constructs which constitute the transient opposition between the sacred and the profane. Or in the words of the soul song that plays during its final credits, *Looper* demonstrates that violence and self-sacrifice alike originate from a single and yet divided source, "from a love so powerful, so powerful, it's a sin."[53]

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[1] I would like to thank my colleague, Richard Mailey, for the many conversations and discussions which helped to illuminate my reading of the film. Likewise, I would also like to thank A. Samuel Kimball for his careful reading of this paper and for his steadfast support.

[2] Gregory Weinkauf, "Director Rian Johnson Discusses His Tight, Ultraviolent 'Looper,'" *Huffington Post*, September 28, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gregory-weinkauf/rian-johnson-looper_b_1924267.html.

[3] Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 57.

[4] Gordon Lynch maintains that forms of the sacred are crucial to the beliefs and moral commitments that guide human actions in both religious and secular life: "The sacred is defined by what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities that exert unquestionable moral claims over the meaning and conduct of their lives. Particular forms of the sacred emerge through the passage of history, and involve the weaving together of symbols, systems of thought, powerful moral sentiments and a sense of collective identity. These sacred forms retain their identity through repeated actions, laden with sacred meaning, that reinforce their reality for their adherents." When the values, beliefs, or material objects that an individual holds sacred are threatened by an outside force, the aggressors who threaten to transgress the sacred may themselves be identified as profane, and as a result they may become the victims of seemingly legitimate acts of violent reprisal (Gordon Lynch, *On the Sacred* [Durham: Acumen, 2012], 32).

[5] Ibid., 26.

[6] Ibid., 157.

[7] Cinema's unique capacity for creating experiences that may be regarded as sacred has been well-noted by scholars of religion and film. More than simply offering a simulation of religious experience, S. Brent Plate argues that films pursue the same end-goal as religion—recreating the world (S. Brent Plate, "Filmmaking and World Making: Re-Creating Time and Space in Myth and Film," in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins [Oxford University Press, 2008], 219–32).

[8] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 1975): 6–18.

[9] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 17.

[10] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 37.

[11] Ibid., 23.

[12] Ibid., 18–21.

[13] Jacques Derrida, "Force De Loi: Le Fondement Mystique De L'Autorite," *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990): 920–1045.

[14] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1.

[15] Ibid., 23.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 9.

[18] Ibid., 10.

[19] Ibid., 11.

[20] Ibid.

[21] René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone Press, 1987).

[22] Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limit of Reason Alone," in *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–78.

[23] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 54.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 56.

[26] Ibid., 57.

[27] In his book *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*, A. Samuel Kimball uncovers the extent to which the pursuit of self-interest, as an expression of the evolutionary quest for survival, is thoroughly sacrificial towards other human and biological life. According to Kimball, "The knowledge that "existence costs" compresses into a single proposition the consequences of the bio-economic burden that any group of people…must negotiate…how to deflect the costs of individual and collective existence elsewhere than onto itself, elsewhere than onto its own members, or where this is not possible, onto its most expendable members"(*The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* [Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007], 21).

[28] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 163–164.

[29] Weinkauf, "Director Rian Johnson Discusses His Tight, Ultraviolent 'Looper.'"

[30] In his examination of the development of the "hard-boiled" detective in early twentieth century fiction and film, John T. Irwin suggests the conflicts experienced by characters such as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* and Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* are often presented not as intellectual challenges but as challenges of manhood. The male protagonists in detective films and other hard-boiled fiction emerged at a time when American men struggled to find a sense of masculine identity in an evolving work environment. Irwin argues that "the three roles that made Bogart a star and that, by the time *Casablanca* won the best picture Oscar for 1943, made him the king of the Warner's lot, roles in which Bogart "threw women away," added to the Bogart persona the sense not only that his tough exterior often masked a sentimental or idealistic core but also that he possessed an interior toughness able to sacrifice personal desire to a professional code or political ideal" (John T. Irwin, *Unless the Threat of Death Is Behind Them: Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006], 219).

[31] Relating the term to the ambivalent role of the scapegoat, Girard notes that "It is not surprising that the word *pharmakon* in classical Greek means both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short, any substance capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage" (*Violence and the Sacred*, 95).

[32] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 31.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Rian Johnson, *Looper* (Tristar Pictures; DMG Entertainment, 2012).

[36] For an in-depth discussion of the infanticide in works of western literature and popular film see Kimball, *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture*. See also Karen J. Renner, ed., *The "Evil Child" in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[37] Paul Kahn notes a crucial connection between the values of the family and the political values of the state in western society. According to Kahn, "What we know within the family as ordinary domestic life—an intergenerational project committed to the well-being of those to whom we are connected by love—we know within the polity as the rule of law—a similar

intergenerational project of well-being." However, beyond the commitment to "the pursuit of well-being that is the ordinary concern of the law and family", Kahn argues that western society remains devoted to a cultural narrative which connects "a meaningful life to a willingness to sacrifice that life." As a result, he claims that "We may try to push that sacrifice onto others—the enemy—but myths of state, religion, and family all converge on the same point of self-sacrifice. The sacrificial demand is always the same: the parent must die for the child, Christ must die for man, and the citizen must die for the state. A life that fails to embrace the possibility of sacrifice appears to be without meaning—familial, religious, or political" (Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008], 97–98).

[38] Lynch, *On the Sacred*, 125.

[39] Ibid., 126.

[40] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 17.

[41] According to King, the traumas which the victim-hero has suffered in the past are rendered meaningful for the audience because his sacrificial death transforms him into a sacred form that offers salvation to those around him. His death is not only perceived as a means of redemption within the film, but as a metonymy for American culture's own historical traumas, she suggests that the masculine hero's sacrifice is also interpreted as a form of redemption for America's traumatized masculinity and national identity (Claire Sisco King, *Washed in Blood: Male Sacrifice, Trauma, and the Cinema* [Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2011], 3).

[42] Ibid., 17.

[43] Plots that revolve around various types of sacrificial dilemmas have been a staple of countless popular American films, and the recurrence of narratives in which the protagonist sacrifices himself for the greater good has been well-noted by film critics and scholars whose work focuses on the relationship between religion and popular culture. Decisions or actions that may be regarded as self-sacrificial have been frequently interpreted in light of the story of Jesus' crucifixion. See for example, John Charles Cooper and Carl Skrade, "Theology and Films," in *Celluloid and Symbols* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 1–24.

[44] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 34.

[45] Richard J. Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking without Banisters* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 177.

[46] quoted in Ibid., 170.

[47] Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29, *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Anglicized (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[48] My use of the term "lesser violence" is derived from Martin Hägglund's discussion of the supposed ethical turn in deconstruction. In his examination of Derrida and Levinas's differing approaches to ethical metaphysics and the concept of justice, Hägglund observes that the term "lesser violence" only features briefly in Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics". Hägglund develops the idea within the larger context of Derrida's work on justice and deconstruction; consequently, he begins his argument with the assertion that "all decisions made in the name of justice are made in view of what is judged to be the lesser violence. If there is always an economy of violence, decisions of just cannot be a matter of choosing what

is nonviolent" ("The Necessity of Discrimination: Disjoining Derrida and Levinas," *Diacritics* 34, no. 1 [April 1, 2004]: 48). Within the context of my analysis of *Looper*, Sara's efforts to protect Cid are motivated by something more than a mere ideological pursuit of justice, but it is perhaps this sense of a deep, emotional response to a perceived threat that is lacking within contemporary notions of justice which primarily disregards law's origins in the immunizing force of the sacred. See for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Philosophical Debate," in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 354–400.

[49] Jolyon Mitchell, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 229.

[50] Lynch's notion of *askesis* is derived from the work of Michel Foucault and in particular his introduction to *The Use of Pleasure (The History of Sexuality)*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 2 (New York: Vintage Books, 1988). See also Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Northwestern University Press, 2007).

[51] Lynch, *On the Sacred*, 144.

[52] Ibid., 144–145.

[52] Chuck & Mac, *Powerful Love*, CD, Eccentric Soul: Twinight's Lunar Rotation (The Numero Group, 2007).

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