6-2-2016

The Divine Exhaustion of Myth and Parable in Cronenberg’s A History of Violence

Rich Cooper
richpaulcooper@gmail.com

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss2/4
The Divine Exhaustion of Myth and Parable in Cronenberg’s A History of Violence

Abstract
Cronenberg’s A History of Violence is a film about dichotomies which are not really dichotomies. Wholesome Americana seemingly opposes seedy, urban America, religion seemingly opposes violence, and myth seemingly opposes parable. These oppositions are revealed to be two sides of the same coin. Using the Moebius strip to re-conceptualize the relation between myth and parable, both types of religious stories, this essay reveals the ways in which myth and parable exhaust each other in a cycle of powermaking violence. This exhaustion reveals myth and parable to be inadequate, necessitating divine intervention.

This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss2/4
Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen) lives an idyllic life in the small town of Millbrook, Indiana. He owns a diner on Main Street, is loved by the community, and has a loving, perfect nuclear family: Edie (Maria Bello), his wife, Jack (Ashton Holmes), his teenage son, and Sarah (Heidi Hayes), his young daughter. Their life in Millbrook is seemingly perfect; it is interrupted by a random act of violence. Two sinister drifters attempt to rob Tom’s store and rape one of his employees. Tom kills the two men, and the media attention attracts his past associates to Millbrook; we gradually discover that Tom was once a mobster named Joey Cusack from Philadelphia, that he changed his identity, and that he moved to Millbrook to escape his violent past. When the mafia does find him, he deals with it the only way the mafia understands: violently. Eventually Tom is summoned back to Philadelphia. His brother is the mafia boss and Tom is forced to kill his own brother to stop the violence. The repercussions of Tom’s former, violent life disrupt the neat fabric of his life in Millbrook, permanently altering him and his family. David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* exhausts the redemptive possibilities of mythic violence, resulting in a religious story that is neither “myth” nor “parable.” The oscillation between myth and parable, mirrored thematically by the oscillation between religion and violence, is forced to its logical extreme in the film, thereby making the divine, which only enters only at the end of the film, necessary.
Myth and parable are distinct and contrasting types of religious stories. In Film as Religion John Lyden paraphrases these categories:

myth “establishes” world, and “parable” subverts it. Myth seeks to resolve tensions, but parable emphasizes the absence of resolution. Whereas myth satisfies their hearers through visions of vindication and wholeness, parables convey a challenging vision of the world that stresses risk-not-security, weakness-not-strength, and death-not-life.1

Myth restores order to the world while parable subverts it; however, the term ‘world’ presents a dilemma, because in every age there are myths and there are parables; thus, epistemologically speaking, different “worlds” for different ages. “World” applies to a historically conditioned understanding and is therefore historically mutable. From this historical standpoint, parable and myth do not exist as dichotomies – they are two sides of the same coin. Subversion always entails establishment, and establishment always entails subversion. The divine is what ruptures this oscillation between parable and myth.

Critical attention on the film centers on the tension between the idyllic, small-town life of the Stalls and the horrific and violent lifestyle of the city. The film begins with a random act of violence: two criminals staying at a motel kill and rob the people in the motel, and in a gut-wrenching scene, one of the murderers shoots a young girl. The scene immediately cuts to the home of the Stalls. The daughter, Sarah, has woken up from a nightmare and the rest of the family, Tom, Edie, and Jack, come in to comfort her. The opening scene and the cut to the Stall
home effectively establish a tension between two very different lifestyles. These apparent tensions are made all too obvious throughout the film. On one side we have a husband and wife passionately in love with each other, a small town that “takes care of its own”, baseball, cruising the main drag, and a perfect nuclear family. On the other side is Joey Cusack, the violent man that Tom used to be, men who cold-bloodedly kill for a living, big cities, thugs, violent and vindictive mobsters.

But the dichotomy between the violent and the idyllic, between ‘noir-america’ and ‘wholesome Americana,’ does not exist. Steve Schaviro writes, “It’s wrong to explain away the dualities and dichotomies of [Cronenberg’s] films by saying that one side is the dream or fantasy or underside of the other” (“A History of Violence”). Instead, the dualities in the film must be thought of as a Moebius strip:

the dichotomy or structural opposition that the film presents us with is false…. In other words, A History of Violence is like a Moebius strip. At any given point, it seems to have two sides; but the two sides are really the same side, each is continuous with the other, and slides imperceptibly into the other. There is no way to separate the Capra/Spielberg side from the noir/revenge nocturnal side…. Both sides, both identities, are surfaces; both are ‘superficial’; and they blends [sic] into one other almost without our noticing.2

Each side holds an equal footing; one is not more true or real or right or wrong than the other. Schaviro’s reading is quite good. In fact, the two sides he writes about,
the Capra/Spielberg wholesome side, and the noir/revenge nocturnal side, establish a structure, the Moebius strip, that permeates other aspects of the film as well, especially regarding the tension between religion and violence, a tension which, like the wholesome/noir tension, does not actually exist.

Violence is a clear motif in the film. Religion, however, is much more subdued and implicit. First and foremost, Tom wears a cross around his neck. There are two scenes where the cross calls attention to itself. The first comes after Tom sees the mobsters outside of his diner and runs home to defend his family from the possible violence that the mobsters could inflict on them. After realizing he simply panicked—the mobsters had not actually gone to his home—Tom sits to catch his breath. Jack asks Tom what they would have done had the mobsters actually arrived. “We take care of it,” Tom replies snapping shut the breech of the shotgun he is holding. Throughout this exchange a small silver cross figures prominently as it hangs from Tom’s neck.

The cross is also conspicuous after Tom kills his brother. Tom wades into the lake behind his brother’s house, removes his shirt, and in a scene which echoes Arthurian Literature and the return of Excalibur, he tosses his gun into the lake. Juxtaposed against Tom’s bare skin, the silver cross demands the viewer’s attention. In his director’s commentary, Cronenberg admits that the crosses were Viggo Mortensen’s and Maria Bello’s decision. Cronenberg thought the idea was
wonderful because, to paraphrase, it highlighted what he called the paradoxical nature of American Christianity with regards to violence (although American Christianity hardly has a monopoly on violence).

Tom’s transformation from Joey to Tom is also a religious allusion. While killing Carl Fogarty (Ed Harris) and his men, Tom is shot in the shoulder. Edie witnesses Tom killing the mobsters and for the first time realizes she is not seeing her husband; she sees Joey. When Edie confronts him about what she sees, when she asks him to tell the truth about his past, Tom is hysterical. Tom insists Joey is dead; he insists he ventured into the desert and killed Joey. The desert motif is common for all three of the major monotheistic religions: Moses led his people through the desert for forty years, Jesus went out into the desert and was tempted by the devil, and Mohammed endured the desert when he left Mecca for Medina. The desert is a place of ritual purification, a place where Tom could cleanse himself of his violent alter-ego, Joey.

If myth “establishes world” and parable “subverts world,” then myth and parable are equally at work within A History of Violence. The key term there is that they are equally at work; one is no more important than the other, each opposing sides of a Moebius strip. This relationship is demonstrated through the form of the narrative and its two seemingly opposing sides, wholesome/noir-America, religion/violence. Myth and parable reveal themselves to be really nothing more
than the oscillation between two forces, lawmaking and lawpreserving. Considered as a Moebius strip, parable and myth both constitute forms of ‘lawmaking.’ According to Walter Benjamin, “Lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence.”³ Both myth and parable are engaged in power struggles, in violence, and “All violence as a means is either lawmaking or lawpreserving.”⁴ Lawmaking, parable, and lawpreserving, myth, are different sides of the same violent, powermaking coin.

The opening shot of the movie establishes world. Two killers staying at a motel kill the employees at the motel and a young girl. Culturally, this scene is nothing surprising even while brutal and gratuitous. Given the generic expectations of this film, an action/thriller, such a violent opening scene only seems natural, maybe even right. Violence is the myth; violence in this instance establishes world in the film, and the world is a terrifying, dangerous place. This horrific act of violence is immediately juxtaposed against a scene almost nauseating in its wholesome, unadulterated goodness. Sarah Stall wakes up from a horrible nightmare and every member of the family runs into her room to comfort her. This scene is not all that implausible; Cronenberg, in the director’s commentary, notes such a scene is entirely possible. What makes the scene nauseating, even unbearable, is that it simply seems too good to be true compared to the horrific act of violence that preceded it. Following the cues which the film presents, and if the
violence of the establishing shot indeed does establish world, then what follows, by nature of the fact that it is a glaring juxtaposition, must clearly be meant to subvert the world established by the film. Thus we have the beginning of a parable; family values, wholesome Americana, subverting the terrifying world of senseless violent world of wanton murderer.

As the film progresses it is less and less clear which side of the narrative is myth, which is parable. After the initial shots, wholesome Americana becomes such an overwhelming force that it actually establishes world. We are bombarded with small town America and it dominates early screen time: Tom owns a diner on Main Street, Tom and Edie are a married couple still very much in love with each other, Jack plays baseball in gym class and is taunted by a bully. Most of all, the music in the film constantly reassures the viewer that everything is safe and good with the world; world is established and it is good.

The distinction between violent myth and wholesome parable breaks down after Tom kills the men that try to rob his diner. Wholesome Americana is established as world, but only by forcing the violent world to the periphery. Therefore the two men that show up in Tom’s diner enact a parable because they subvert, again, the wholesome world that the film has established. From this point on myth and parable are in constant, dialectical tension. The violence from outside subverts the small town life of the Stalls, threatening to tear apart the world that
they recognize and hold dear, to replace it with a world that is confused, hidden, dark, terrifying, and violent. The small town musters all of its forces against the subversion, but it is not until Tom decides to use violence that the subversion is stalled. Tom goes to Philadelphia and faces his brother, knowing that violently killing his brother is the only possible way to preserve his wholesome family and their wholesome life in Millbrook. He could call the police, but his secret, his hidden past would be revealed and the subversion would succeed despite his efforts.

The irony is that violence, despite and because of Tom’s best efforts, succeeds in subverting the wholesome, good world. First, Jack enters a cycle of violence. He puts the local bully in the hospital, and he pulls the trigger that kills Carl Fogarty. Additionally, Edie is fully integrated into the world of violence when she is violently fucked on the stairs, not by Tom, but by Joey, her good husband’s murderous alter-ego. Violence re-establishes itself as myth by fully enveloping those that it touches. The final scene is a world in which it is unclear whether the world is violent or wholesome. Violence permeates everything, yet because Tom is reintegrated into the family at the dinner table, there still remains the deceitful implication that the Stalls could return to their normal lives.

To simply speak of the myth of violence and the parable of wholesomeness ignores the insights exposed earlier: the seemingly opposing sides of the plot are not oppositions at all but rather intimately related. Just as wholesome
Americana/noir-America and religion/violence are part and parcel of the same thing, myth and parable are really part of the same thing. Myth and parable, through their oscillation, are both figures of power, law, and violence.

Myth and parable reach a point where they come to a veritable standstill. Violence still lurks, wholesomeness still exists; neither can eliminate the other. The film chooses neither, instead ending ambiguously. Tom enters, Sarah sets his plate and Jack hands him the meatloaf. Edie bows her head over her plate, seemingly in prayer, though she could be simply avoiding eye contact with Tom. Eventually the two do make eye contact and exchange an intense stare filled with both love and pain. There is no certainty, no insurance that everything will be okay. One can speculate, given the actions of the children, that everything will return to normal, but Jack, fighting in school and killing Fogarty, and Edie, violently fucked by Joey, are introduced into the realm of violence; violence is part and parcel of the wholesome family unit, especially even the wholesome aspects participate in powermaking. Even the fact that Tom’s homecoming is not a jubilant one but rather a difficult tear-filled one serves to strengthen the fact that the future is uncertain and scary. The violent world and the wholesome world, because they are inseparable, exhaust each other and leave a void to be filled by something unpredicted and unexpected. Because myth and parable in the film exist in an irreconcilable tension, the film highlights the need for a rupture from the previous
laws, powers, and epistemologies in creating new truths and new ways of conceiving the world.

This rupture is the divine, but the divine is difficult to recognize as such. According to Benjamin,

mythic violence is confronted by the divine... If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.5

The final scene of A History of Violence is divine because the mythic violence of lawmaking, parable, and law preserving, myth, is suspended. Tom, the family man, becomes violent to protect his family, and Joey Cusack, the violent man, becomes a father and family man. The two men are perfectly integrated, and the rules which governed the previous ‘world’ of the text are no longer sufficient. The old rules must be destroyed and replaced because following the old rules there is no place for a man who is both father and murderer. The divine suspends the perpetual oscillation between myth and parable, revealing that Tom is Joey and Joey is Tom. This unity is only possible through the exhaustion of myth and parable.


2 ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Benjamin, 250.

References


