

ALLEGORY, REDEMPTIONISM AND TRAGIC TEMPTATION IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS IN RESPONSE TO THE GREAT WAR (1915-1930)

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This article attempts to trace the intuitive uses of an allegorical and redemptionist¹ aesthetic – and the tragic temptation with which it was imbued – in a few major Hollywood productions made in the years during and after the First World War. The starting point for this analysis is a significant chronological coincidence: *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), the film that historiography naturally associates with the *birth* itself of cinema as a great narrative spectacle, began production during the same tragic days in 1914 when the First World War broke out. The feature film thus gave birth to the great epic at the same time that the world was drowning in a sea of self-destruction. An allegorical allusion to this coincidence is present in the film, and is the first link in an instinctive rhetorical gesture with a redemptionist tone that subsequent films would make explicit. The melodramatic nature of these cinematic operations is hybridised with a boldly tragic imperative which is sometimes subdued, but which on occasions transcends it.

BEFORE THE AMERICAN INTERVENTION: THE ALLEGORICAL TREND

The fact that when *The Birth of a Nation* was released Griffith already had a clear idea of what the cinema should represent as a communal expression of the tragedy of his century can be seen clearly in the ambitious intertitles that open and close his film. The first is programmatic: “If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not have been in vain.” The sheer immodesty with which he closes the film (accompanied by allegorical images of the Last Judgement) is even greater: “Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more. But instead – the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace. Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever.”

The intertitles that mark this foundational feature film of cinematic history unabashed-

**THE GRIFFITHIAN CONTRADICTION
(BETWEEN THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE
COMMISSION AND HIS PASSION FOR
PREACHING) BECOME EVIDENT IN THIS
FILM: HOW COULD HE STIR UP A DESIRE
FOR COMBAT IN THE AUDIENCE WHILE
AT THE SAME TIME DEPICTING THE
MISERABLE CONDITIONS OF WAR
IN THE TRENCHES?**

ly represent a perspective intended to be fully absorbed into the worldview of the masses. It is important to bear in mind that the filmic narrative resulting from Griffith's intuitive work is not merely an adaptation of nineteenth century melodrama to the cinema, but a passionate hybrid between those conventions and the need for a primitive epic register inherent to a relatively modern national community that would find, in the cinema, a privileged means of legitimating its origins. In this paradoxical blend of Dickens and Homer, the feature film channels a synthetic energy comparable to the model of the Wagnerian opera (SMITH: 2008), and it is through this megalomaniacal syncretism that the poetics of the new narrative system proposed in *The Birth of a Nation* was forged.

In the director's next film, *Intolerance* (D. W. Griffith, 1916), this universalist consciousness is not merely a frame through which to tell the story, but the very foundation of its compositional fabric. Thus, although it is not apparently a film about the European War, its pacifist mentality is expressed through a bold attempt at a global survey of human history, in which the fates of individuals – the four episodes that tie together the film's variegated plot (LENNING, 2005) – are integrated into a historical logic with a tragic tone², although with the necessary redemptive ending. It is tragic because in his filmic discourse in support of tolerance, Griffith breaks the hierarchy of his-

torical progress, and replaces what Michael Maffessoli has called the "linear nature of history" with the "cycle or spiral of fate" (2003: 14). Yet it is also redemptionist, because the rhetoric of the film will once again need to turn to Judeo-Christian religious allegory in its apothotic finale.

Indeed, *Intolerance* concludes with an eschatological imaginary that transcends its four stories: the armies cease fire and drop their weapons, the prison walls collapse, and the freed prisoners enter an unreal heaven inhabited by angelic children, while an intertitle announces a redemptive divine intervention which, at the end of time, will bring down the pillars of *intolerance*.

If Griffith's film invokes apocalyptic imagery, it is of course because such imagery is the horizon of tragic expectations that marks the abyss of Western consciousness. The peace yearned for in the film was still a possibility in the year of its release, although the debate over US intervention in the war was beginning to tip the balance of public opinion towards a belligerent patriotism which is also opposed by the other great allegorical film of the day: *Civilization* (Thomas H. Ince *et al.*, 1916)³. Although the neutrality of the United States at that time required the action of this film to be set in an imaginary kingdom, the allusion to the real war is perfectly clear, as is its open redemptionism. In the second half of the film, Jesus Christ himself returns to Earth, reincarnated as a count who died disobeying orders in order to protect innocent civilians, and descended into a Purgatory which is depicted in the film with an iconography owing much to Gustave Doré. When Christ, like a Dickensian Christmas ghost, takes the monarch responsible for going to war to show him the catastrophes his crusade has wrought, until at last he repents, *Civilization* confirms the interest that such messianic allegories laid bare in a time when American neutrality allowed its creators to observe the self-destructive path chosen by Europe from the perspective of religious redemptionism.

AMERICA AT WAR: THE MELODRAMA OF ROMANTIC COMPENSATION

The entry of the United States into the conflict in April 1917 required the pleas to be turned into pure propaganda. This explains the absence of religious allegories in *Hearts of the World* (D. W. Griffith, 1918), a film which its director began preparing at the request of the British army, but which was actually shot after President Wilson had already declared war (LENNING, 2011). The Griffithian contradiction (between the obligations of the commission and his passion for preaching) become evident in this film: how could he stir up a desire for combat in the audience while at the same time depicting the miserable conditions of war in the trenches? According to different sources who had witnessed it, the visit that Griffith made to the battlefields before he started shooting the film upset all of his previous ideas about how to depict the action. Many years later, Paul Virilio's architectural view would capture it well by contrasting the panoramic view offered by the dynamic wide shot of the battle in *The Birth of a Nation* (a war that can still be grasped from the romantic perspective of a *plein air* depiction) with the discovery, *in situ*, of a war that "had become a static conflict in which the main action was for millions of men to hold fast to their piece of land, camouflaging themselves for months on end (years in cases like Verdun) amid a fearful proliferation of cemeteries and charnel-houses" (VIRILIO, 1984: 19).

Against this structural evidence, Griffith was forced to adopt a compromise solution: to express the general horror and, at the same time, to imagine plausible individual solutions for the protagonists of his film. The construction of a romantic plot that brings an American volunteer, Douglas (Robert Harron) into a relationship with a young French woman, May (Lillian Gish) pushes the chronological progression of the film towards the couple's happy reunion at the end, after a series of traumatic incidents that have split them

apart when, right before their wedding, the town is bombed by the Germans, who have killed the girl's family. Misery, uncertainty, fear of his death, and a final rescue where Douglas comes back to save Mary from imminent execution, punctuate a film that swings between the far-from-comforting depiction of living conditions in times of war and a final triumph over any pessimistic imaginary through the melodramatic elevation of the individual hero. On the one hand, the sequences showing the destruction of a town under the impact of the bombing, or civilians dying among the rubble as the town is plundered by the invaders, are particularly significant. On the other, the salvation of the leading couple offers a promise of triumph free of any sense of tragedy.

It would thus only be with the arrival of peace, and leaving behind the view of the battlefield strewn with dead bodies, that American cinema, without the need to feed pointless patriotic urges, would be able to define a potentially tragic territory for dramatic reflection on the conflict.

AFTER THE ARMISTICE: THE TRAGIC ALLEGORY

The parents of the female protagonist of *Hearts of the World* die in the German invaders' attack in the first part of the film. Starting off from this initial hard knock, Griffith's script moves towards a plausible reconstruction of the children's happiness. As terrible as it may be, this is a natural cycle, which the human heart accepts, because the circular nature of generational change is explored from a point of view that is always forward-looking. If the parents die so that the children may take their place, the macabre episode of the war can find dramatic forms of compensation.

When the redemptionist organisation of narrative time is altered, we enter the realm of tragedy. This is what is suggested in the final sequence of the film adaptation of Blasco Ibáñez's novel *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram,

1921), set in the immense graveyard of the French battlefield. Amidst the maze of tombstones, the patriarch Marcelo Desnoyers (Josef Swickard) and his wife Luisa (Bridgetta Clark) keep vigil at the grave of their only child, Julio (Rudolph Valentino), while, in neighbouring Germany, their German relatives, Karl von Hartrott (Alan Hale) and Elena (Mabel Van Buren), are mourning the loss of Otto (Stuart Holmes), their last surviving son. The two cousins, enlisted in opposing armies, died together in the explosion of a grenade that fell in the trench where the resolute hand of fate had brought them together.

In a plot in which everything is orchestrated around a geometry of disaster, *History* offers a contemporary image of Oedipus's sons Eteocles and Polynices killing one another at the city gates in *Seven against Thebes*. Marcelo and Karl, the two brothers-in-law who return to Europe after inheriting the fortune of an Argentine landholder, in a fatal decision that will lead to the deaths of their sons in the war, are also contemporary representatives of the old patriarchs destroyed by fate in the Greek tragedies. To reflect this feeling of final desperation is one of the challenges assumed by the director, Rex Ingram, when showing the battlefield strewn with dead bodies where Julio Desnoyers' parents are faced with the certainty of their son's death. The shot is taken at a slightly low angle, where the sky is not visible, as a mountain of crosses occupies the space of the shot. It is impossible to read this multiplicity of crosses optimistically. The result of this image is to eliminate the horizon, a visual motif which American iconography has generally associated with hope (BALLÓ, 2000: 189-190). In a lucid intuition of the dark road that immediate history would have to take, the future outlined by this graveyard shot contains a premonition of new episodes of violence.

The fact that this destructive energy is visually embodied in the horsemen of the Apocalypse suggests an equivalence that links the archetypal depiction of the biblical riders to the allegorical

magnificence of *Intolerance*, with its famous image of the Mother (Lillian Gish) rocking the cradle of Humanity, and the Fates weaving the threads of destiny into violent stories that repeat over and over.

This cosmogonic immersion is facilitated by the intrinsic capacities of the filmic material in the metaphorical use of meteorological disasters. One of the film's intertitles compares History to a swirling maelstrom, and another suggests that it "threatens to engulf all Europe" while turbulent images of fire and water are superimposed on the screen in the background. The effect of the superimposition is the same effect as the metaphor of the cyclical return of this hurricane. Its recurring use as an invocation of war accentuates a pessimistic awareness of dark forces that lead humanity time and again to catastrophe⁴.

As did Griffith's allegorical endings, this desolate perspective projects the imagination towards the promise of a peace beyond History. The final intertitle in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is explicit: "Peace has come. But the Four Horsemen will still ravage humanity, stirring unrest in the world, until all hatred is dead and only love reigns in the heart of mankind." In this extremely solemn conclusion, a view of the Judeo-Christian imperatives of redemption effectively crystallises that utopian energy which, in the words of Stéphane Mosès (1997: 15), "is wholly dedicated – as a kind of compensation – to eschatological dreams, to waiting for the final catastrophe, so that from its ruins a new humanity may arise."

This imperative is hinted at in the character of Tchernoff (Nigel de Brulier), a Russian mystic revolutionary who, in the aforementioned final sequence, when asked by the old Desnoyer whether he knew his son Julio, opens his arms in a cross as if embracing all the other graves and answers flatly: "I knew them all." But while the image of Tchernoff alludes to a hypothetical Christ, here he doesn't exhibit the serene quality of a leader who rekindles hope, as in *Civilization*; rather, he is the

defeated god, who must be content with keeping vigil at the grave of an endless line of dead sons.

What role does he play in a story so marked by the collective consciousness of catastrophe, the story of forbidden love between Julio Desnoyers and the married woman, Marguerite (Alice Terry), who, after all, was largely responsible for the film's success? When they begin their passionate affair in pre-war Paris, the two lovers do not display the slightest sense of guilt. Julio shows no signs of a guilty conscience for ignoring the call to arms, if doing so means that he can stay with his love. It is not patriotic duty that ultimately compels the hero to enlist, but emotional conflict with his father. It is to satisfy the latter that he finally joins up, and thus the tragic nature of the story is transferred to the old man, responsible for having led his son to a death that will never be depicted as a punishment for his erotic affair. In Ingram's film, it is not faith in the expiatory power of sacrifice but a useless death on the battlefield that forces Alice to accept a future with a husband who, to add insult to injury, has been left blind thanks to the war. In *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the war is not viewed as the moral saviour, but as the tragic agent that prevents moral transgression.

THE "HAPPY TWENTIES": FROM PACIFIST ROMANTICISM TO TRIANGULAR MELODRAMA IN A WAR SETTING

Love-story plots would no longer be taken to tragic extremes in any of the war films produced in Hollywood in the 1920s. Nor would the allegorical discourse of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* be repeated in subsequent films. The irrepressible tendency of film production towards the "amiable dramatism of the developed genres" (DEL AMO, 1945: 204) guided plot endings towards a convenient stitching up of wounds. However many allusions there may be to catastrophe, films no longer ended with a view of a field of graves

IN THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE, THE WAR IS NOT VIEWED AS THE MORAL SAVIOUR, BUT AS THE TRAGIC AGENT THAT PREVENTS MORAL TRANSGRESSION

watched over by sterile old men. These were films that continued to offer explanations for the tragic drift of recent History. But they didn't shun any romantic refuge that could contrast the collective misfortune of the fallen against the individual salvation of those who make it back. By way of example we need only recall (to cite the most indisputable masterpiece in this series of films) *The Big Parade* (King Vidor, 1925), in which, following the model of *Hearts of the World*, an American volunteer and a French girl who meet in the film are ultimately reunited in a bitter-sweet ending. The amputated leg that casts a shadow over his return from the war serves as a reminder of the happiness that has been lost along the way, but the image that ends the film offers the slightest glimmer of hope.

Other films from the end of the 1920s turn certain deaths in combat into cathartic devices for the happiness of the protagonists. In many romantic-idealist reconstructions of the war, the same effective plot structure is proposed: the rivalry between two soldiers in love with the same girl⁵. The historian Shlomo Sand identifies in this motif a kind of conflict inscribed with the inevitable final death of one of the rivals: "the redemptive death inherent to every war rehabilitates the eternal couple and undoes this far from holy trinity" (SAND, 2004: 88). Here we have a clear way of discerning the ultimate presence of death in its truly tragic essence.

To adapt the imagery of the war to this subtle romanticism, some films distance the spectator from the infernal vision of the trenches (an element that is still essential to the indisputable pa-

cifism of *The Big Parade*) by using a strategy that would see its first success in *Wings* (William A. Wellman, 1927): setting the story in the air force, with the conversion of the characters into winged heroes, for whom death (if it appears) provides the expiatory and sacrificial basis underlying all war propaganda films. Individual stories now prevail so clearly over the focus on the collective space that the need to give figurative form to the global catastrophe no longer appears as a dramatic foundation. The war is the context, but not the text.

Only one film, after the introduction of sound, would attempt to return to a tragic poetics with a collective perspective. But that film, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), could not make use of the old allegorical transcendentalism of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* to show the darker side of the conflict. Instead, realism (a collateral requirement of the nascent talkie) would favour the descent, with no hope of return, into the chaos of blood, sweat and mud.

THE EXCEPTION OF 1930: A TRAGEDY IN THE TRENCHES

Films like *Intolerance*, *Civilization* or *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* had framed the image of war in a grandiloquent context where human history was wholly subject to an *axis mundi* governed by higher powers. With American cinema's shift towards love stories with war as a backdrop, the metaphysical transcendentalism disappeared, but the price paid was the loss of the old universalist dimension. The big challenge represented by *All Quiet on the Western Front* for the war film was to continue to avoid the old verticalising cosmogony of the *axis mundi*, without sacrificing the syncretistic spirit that could attempt to compress the collective experience of the war into a single story. This would mean, on the one hand, stripping down any romantic sub-plot that might introduce melodramatic peculiarities into a human story that aspired to represent all human stories; and, on the

other, proposing a realist poetics of the *here and now* free of allusions to higher worlds. *All Quiet on the Western Front* consists of a relentless succession of traumatic scenes, constructed according to a carefully calculated idea of progress perverted, which positions the audience in the certainty that each situation for the protagonists will be worse than the last.

The fact that American cinema could produce such a despairing film might initially be explained by the fact that all its protagonists are German; the catastrophe is bearable because its victims belong to the now dimmed memory of what was once the enemy side. But this is a starting point that the illusion of the filmic narrative pushes well into the background. Introducing a convention that would soon be customary in the Hollywood talkie, these German soldiers speak all the while in perfect English, and the strategies to achieve emotive proximity between them and the audience are the same ones employed in Hollywood war films whose protagonists are Americans. The fact that both the author of the novel, Eric Marie Remarque, and the film's director, Lewis Milestone, had fought in the trenches, and on opposite sides, helps explain the anthropological universalism elicited by the film, its expressive capacity to turn the human type, beyond any national origin, into a single repository for the horrors of war. *All Quiet on the Western Front* does not attempt an accusation of an enemy nation (OCHLING, 1973; CHAMBERS II, 1994), but a critical acknowledgement of an awareness of the universal mourning caused by the hubris of all militarised nationalism.

Milestone's film follows the canonical plot developments of all war films created by Hollywood: the enlistment, the training, the wait and the battle, to conclude with a not-so-common private apocalypse in the trenches. *All Quiet on the Western Front* does not set up a contextual framework of victors and vanquished, or provide a historical documentation of the events. All of its attention

is focused on the claustrophobic plight of a small unit of soldiers on a progressive descent towards total extinction. This time, there is no coming back, and no sentimental palliative.

IN MILESTONE'S FILM, THE HOLLYWOOD INSTITUTION PRESENTS AN EXCEPTIONAL HUMANISATION OF THE MEMORY OF THE VANQUISHED, REVEALING THE FUTILITY OF THEIR DEATHS

The radical expressive economy with which the film recounts the tragedy makes up the figurative dimension of its symbols. Contrasting with the winged grandeur of Rex Ingram's apocalyptic horsemen, in the final scene of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, is the tiny flight of a butterfly which the soldier Paul (Lew Ayres) attempts unsuccessfully to catch in his hand, moments before an enemy bullet takes his life.

This minimalist representation of the fleetingness of time in the dynamic metaphor of the ungraspable insect, while Paul's body lies lifeless in the trench that has constituted the nuclear core of the film, gives his tragic fate a universal dimension. The same effect is achieved in the famous moment when a French combatant hides in Paul's trench, and Paul has no choice but to kill him. Sharing the trench with the corpse, Paul sees a projection of his own imminent future, and accepts a situation prototypical of the drama of war: the vigil over the enemy's dead body, the moment when the one still living identifies in his lifeless foe the fatal condition that unites them. Paul's remorse has no return, nor does it lead to salvation: he is not so much a living man who regrets having killed one of his fellow men, but a condemned man who knows that he is already a victim of an absurdity which, sooner or later, will take his life as well.

In the ending to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the images of the army marching away towards

the horizon, superimposed over images of a graveyard filled with crosses, are interrupted every now and then by the young faces of the soldiers whom the audience has seen die, turning around to face the camera, in a rhetorical device that cannot console us with the idea that their sacrifice served some purpose. In Milestone's film, the Hollywood institution presents an exceptional humanisation of the memory of the vanquished, revealing the futility of their deaths. In the uncertain interlude of peace of the 1930s, this remembrance constitutes one of the most radical examples of pure cinematic tragedy, stripped of redemptive idealism and religious allegory, which classical Hollywood has ever allowed in all of its history.

NOTES

- 1 In Christian theology, the term "redemptionism" is commonly employed to refer specifically to the doctrine that all humanity has been redeemed by Christ's resurrection; in this article, however, it is employed more broadly to refer to the Judeo-Christian concept of religious redemption in general.
- 2 The hypothesis of a "tragic" Griffith was boldly posited seventy years ago by Antonio del Amo, in his intuitive and extraordinarily unique *Historia universal del cine*: "But above all, Griffith was more than a maker of actors and a master among directors: he was the creator of the first great serious genre of the nascent art form: tragedy" (1945: 204). José Javier Marzal has also referred to *fatum* in Griffith's films, identifying war as one its manifestations (MARZAL, 1998: 267).
- 3 Although it was technically attributed to a single director, Thomas H. Ince, *Civilization* was in fact shot by various filmmakers at the service of Ince's idea: Raymond B. West, Jay Hunt, Reginald Baker, J. Parker Red, Walter Edwards and David Hartford (LEUTRAT, 1997: 251).
- 4 On the chronosophical significance of superimposition in the earliest historical films, see BOSSENO, 1995: 56-57.
- 5 This structure was already formulated in the French film *J'accuse!* (Abel Gance, 1918), which, although it

does not fall within my area of study here, had a significant influence on American post-war films.

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ALLEGORY, REDEMPTIONISM AND TRAGIC TEMPTATION IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS IN RESPONSE TO THE GREAT WAR (1915-1930)

Abstract

The article traces the intuitive uses of an allegorical aesthetic – and the tragic temptation with which it was imbued – in a few Hollywood productions made during the First World War and in the 1920s. Allegorical allusions to the war, with religious and pacifist overtones, can be found in the ending to *The Birth of a Nation* and in *Intolerance*, finding full expression in *Civilization*. The country's entry into the conflict led to the recourse to the romanticism of the love-story plot, albeit with tragic connotations (*Hearts of the World*), but it would not be until after the armistice that the tragic allegory would reach its peak, in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. The recovery of the increasingly elusive romanticism of the love story in the twenties would be challenged in 1930, with a realist tragedy without a hint of allegorical transcendentalism: *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Key words

First World War, Tragedy, Allegory, Griffith, Ince, *Hearts of the World*, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

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ALEGORÍA, REDENCIONISMO Y TENTACIÓN TRÁGICA EN EL CINE DE HOLLYWOOD ANTE LA GRAN GUERRA (1915-1930)

Resumen

El artículo rastrea los usos intuitivos de una estética alegórica –y la tentación trágica que la traspasó– en algunas producciones hollywoodienses nacidas durante la Primera Guerra Mundial y los inmediatos años veinte. La alusión alegórica a la guerra, en clave pacifista y religiosa, se produce ya en los finales de *El nacimiento de una nación* e *Intolerancia*, y se manifiesta plenamente en *Civilización*. La entrada del país en el conflicto revierte en un romanticismo de trama amorosa no exento de connotaciones trágicas (*Corazones del mundo*), aunque será con el armisticio cuando la alegoría trágica llegará a su extremo en *Los cuatro jinetes del apocalipsis*. La recuperación del romanticismo de trama amorosa cada vez más evasivo durante los años veinte será replicada, en 1930, con una tragedia realista, sin asomo de transcendentalismo alegórico: *Sin novedad en el frente*.

Palabras clave

Primera Guerra Mundial; tragedia; alegoría; Griffith; Ince; *Corazones del mundo*; *Los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis*; *Sin novedad en el frente*.

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