

Hollywood and the Hero:  
Solving a Case of Mistaken Identity

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English 167

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18 March 2004

## Outline

Thesis statement: Recent films strongly suggest that the hero of the twenty-first century will most likely appear not as a Hollywood star or a mythical manifestation but as a combination of mortal and machine--in short, a cyborg.

- I. Originally relying on earlier heroes from the realms of myth and history, Hollywood studios gradually developed a system for transforming actors into star-heroes.
  - A. Moviegoers began to identify a favorite hero-character with the particular actor who played him or her.
  - B. The studios recognized the financial possibilities of the mass idolization of a commercialized hero and set out to manufacture this “product” efficiently.
    1. The persona that a studio developed to turn an actor into a star was the only public identity that actor was allowed to have.
    2. Early examples of the star-hero included Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford.
- II. As the studio system disintegrated in the 1950s and 1960s, and the stars lost the publicity shield it had provided, the problems of stardom became obvious to the public.
  - A. Films from this period show that the movie industry was self-mockingly aware of its pitfalls.
    1. Sunset Boulevard showed what happened when a hero-image was no longer popular and the system abandoned the star it had made.

2. A Star Is Born showed how the system created a perfect image and forced a human being to become it.
  - B. Widely publicized scandals like that surrounding the death of Marilyn Monroe further increased the public's knowledge of star-hero failings.
  - C. Although scandals seemed only to increase public adoration of stars by giving their images an air of tragic martyrdom, public perception of star-heroes as ideals began to fade.
- III. More recent decades have seen the confusion of identity between film characters and stars take a new form, which has further contributed to the decline of the hero.
- A. The last vestiges of the studio system's image-projection and -protection have vanished, leaving the public with few illusions about the lives of star-heroes
  - B. Rather than admire stars for their heroic achievements and personal qualities, the public envies them for their lifestyle.
  - C. Profound cynicism toward the hero as ideal is reflected in films such as The Ref, which encourage audiences to identify heroes with the stars that portray them rather than vice versa.
  - D. The disappearance of the hero-ideal in film has led to a lack of lasting empathy with the hero among movie audiences.
    1. After audiences see a movie, they no longer associate the character with the film, but rather the actor with the film.

2. To re-create that lasting empathy in a modern context, we need heroes who can overcome the problem of mistaken identity and who are believable and relevant to today's world.

IV. The 1997 film Face/Off can serve as one prototype for overcoming these obstacles.

- A. The film turns mistaken identity against itself, with the two lead actors switching roles in such a way that the audience has its preconceptions of the relationships between star and character challenged and develops a lasting empathy with the hero.
- B. With its portrayal of a hero who resorts to advanced technology to take on the face of his enemy, the film also provides a prototype for the cyborg hero, a form that the twenty-first-century hero may take.

## Hollywood and the Hero:

### Solving a Case of Mistaken Identity

In the song “Amen” from the best-selling album Pieces of You, Jewel Kilcher poses questions about heroes that are worth asking.

Where are my angels?

Where’s my golden one?

Where’s my hope

Now that my heroes

have gone?

These questions are important because the hero, what Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines as “a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities” (“Hero,” def. 1c), seems to have vanished from American popular culture. From Hercules to Robin Hood, from Joan of Arc to Scarlett O’Hara, male and female heroes alike have reflected the ideals and the most admired traits of their respective times: brute strength or sharply honed cunning, devotion to duty or desire for rebellion. Throughout history, and specifically U.S. history, the hero-ideal has endured in the arts--until now. The twentieth century, which started off with the promising evolution of the hero from figure of legend and literature to star of the silver screen, seems to have ended with the near death of the hero as ideal in popular culture.

The eclipse of the hero in film results from a case of what may be called “mistaken identity,” which has caused film heroes’ fates to become inextricably intertwined with the fates of the actors who portray them. This research essay will explore whether today’s films truly signal the end of the hero-ideal and preview a hero-

less future, or whether they instead help the hero evolve to a different, perhaps more realistic, level. If the latter is true, the question then becomes one of what form the new hero will take onscreen. This essay will argue that recent films strongly suggest that the hero of the twenty-first century will most likely appear not as a Hollywood star or a mythical manifestation but as a combination of mortal and machine--in short, a cyborg.<sup>1</sup>

Before either of these questions can be addressed, however, a brief history of Hollywood's relationship with the hero is necessary. Our heroes once came primarily from the fantasy of myth and the remove of history and literature. King Arthur, the Three Musketeers, Jo March of Little Women, Annie Oakley--all have spent time on the hero's pedestal. With the development of motion pictures in the early twentieth century, many of these heroes made the transition from legend to life, or at least to life on the screen. Soon moviegoers were able not only to read about and imagine their heroes in action but also to see them in the most glamorous incarnations Hollywood could create. Fans began to identify a favorite hero-character with the particular actor who played him or her, and this burgeoning case of mistaken identity did not go unnoticed for long. Film historian Morris Beja notes that although the studios, then the most powerful force in Hollywood, had originally hoped to give actors as little influence as possible over the studios' operations, it quickly became obvious that "movie stars sold tickets." Recognizing the enormous financial possibilities inherent in the mass idolization of a commercialized hero, the industry set out to manufacture this "product" as efficiently as possible. As a 1995 video on the star system in Hollywood explains:

In the old days of the studio system there was a structure for developing stars. Players were owned body and soul, signed to long-term contracts.

With the powerful publicity machine run by the studio they could reach an audience of millions. But that alone did not guarantee success. The problem for the studio was to find the one persona out of many possible character roles that would boost a character to stardom. (The Star)

Studios found that manufacturing movie stars was not easy. It required an actor with just the right combination of style, charisma, and talent, and it required just the right roles and public persona to make that actor a star. When it succeeded, however, the mistaken identity was complete. The star became an icon--an ideal--a hero. Many fictional hero types (such as the romantic hero and the western hero) carried over from the prefilm era; but new kinds of heroes also emerged, identified even more closely by the public with the stars who originated them. Early examples of the star-hero included silent film stars Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. "The swashbuckler was born with . . . Fairbanks," according to Beja, who also sees Pickford as the prototype of the brave or "plucky" movie heroine. As Richard deCordova notes in a memorable phrase, the studios wanted to convince millions of moviegoers that "the real hero behave[d] just like the reel hero" (qtd. in Gallagher, pt. 2). Therefore, the persona that a studio developed to turn a working actor into a star was the only public identity that actor would be allowed to have. Film historians like Beja and deCordova, who explores this topic in his book Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America, say that the public's conceptual link between the hero and the star is the reason studios tried so hard to encourage the idea that stars like Fairbanks and Pickford had no private personalities separate from those of their onscreen characters. (See Fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. Baron De Meyer, Mary Pickford, circa 1915, MPTV Images, 20 Feb. 2004  
<[http://www.netropolisusa.biz/scripts/CUWP\\_CGLEXE](http://www.netropolisusa.biz/scripts/CUWP_CGLEXE)>. Hollywood studios tried to stage-manage the image of stars like Mary Pickford to create public illusions of heroic, almost mythological beings.

As silent films gave way to “talkies” and Hollywood cinema emerged as a cultural force in and of itself, new names replaced those of Fairbanks and Pickford on theater marquees. The star system, however, only grew more deeply entrenched. As long as the star-hero stayed separate from the public, buffered by studios in order to keep

the image intact, his or her fictional self remained safe. But the strain of living up to a legend instead of living a life took a toll on the private, “real” selves. Brian Gallagher cites a remark by Cary Grant that sums up the strain many stars must have felt: “Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant” (pt. 3). As the studio system disintegrated in the 1950s and the 1960s and the stars lost the publicity shield it had provided, this toll became glaringly obvious to their adoring public.

Films from this period show that the movie industry was self-mockingly aware of its pitfalls.

Sunset Boulevard, released in 1950, showed what happened when a hero-image was no longer profitable and the system abandoned the star it had made. Gloria Swanson played the fictional silent film star Norma Desmond, once young and adored, now aging and forgotten, who tries in vain to recapture her lost glory and ends her quest in tragedy. A Star Is Born, remade in 1954 with Judy Garland in the

lead role, chronicled the rise of a young woman from nobody to star, showing the reality of how the system created a perfect image and forced a human being to become it (Corey and Ochoa 353, 347). Yet even though these films showed the artificiality and destructiveness of the star system, at the same time they helped to perpetuate it. After all, the fictional star was played by a real-life one--and thus fiction and truth became even further intertwined.

Approximately a decade later, in 1962, Marilyn Monroe died of what was officially ruled an accidental overdose of sleeping pills. And in the words of a television biography, “almost instantly, the lurid circumstances of [her] death made national headlines around the world. . . . Marilyn Monroe was dead. Marilyn the Myth was born” (Box Office Bombshell). The supposedly idyllic life stars lived was being steadily exposed as false through both fictional tragedies and actual scandals, yet paradoxically the public did not turn against the stars but only focused their fascination in a slightly different way. Singer and songwriter Elton John immortalized the unique cult of fame that overshadowed Monroe’s death in his 1973 song “Candle in the Wind,” when he wrote of his own youthful feelings toward her: “Your candle burned out long before / Your legend ever did.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than serving to separate the hero from the star, in fact, scandals only bound the two more closely together, lending a tragic, martyred cast to the star’s image. The public’s adoration of their stars did not diminish. Their perception of their heroes as ideals, however, began to fade.

Fast forward from the fifties and sixties to the present: forty to fifty years later. A brief excerpt from the celebrity gossip-fest Hollywood Confidential shows that the last vestiges of the studio system’s image-projection and -protection have vanished:

Well into the throes of drug addiction by the time she was thirteen, Drew Barrymore attempted suicide by cutting her wrists with a kitchen knife.

Rosemary Clooney was addicted to prescription drugs and, after two embattled marriages to José Ferrer, was admitted to a psych ward.

Francis Ford Coppola takes lithium.

Patty (Call Me Anna) Duke is a manic-depressive. (Amende 247)

No longer do stars try to hide their personal lives from the public, and every scandal, every lie is exposed in the short run. Thus today's public holds very few illusions about the lives of their star-heroes. Although stars are still "living heroes," the relationship between the two terms has changed: rather than admiring stars for their heroic achievements and personal qualities, the public simply envies them for their lifestyle—their immense power, wealth, and fame. Even after the real-life heroism of September 11, a profound cynicism persists toward the hero as ideal, and this cynicism is reflected in the portrayal of the fictional hero in current American films. It is a portrayal that perpetuates the problem of mistaken identity noted earlier, but in reverse, with heroes being identified with the stars that portray them, rather than vice versa.

The 1994 film The Ref offers a fairly recent example of this reversal and of the cynicism it both grows out of and feeds into. As a review on the ABC News Web site Mr. Showbiz notes:

Judy Davis and Kevin Spacey are a married couple who for the life of them can't stop bickering. Denis Leary is the burglar who's taken them hostage on Christmas Eve. Writers Marie Weiss and Richard LaGravanese

have built a . . . platform . . . from which Leary can freely launch himself into the mad stand-up monologues of outrage and spleen that are his trademark [emphasis mine]. (Feeney)

A closer look at this film tells us more. It is Christmas Eve, a traditional time of sharing and harmony among loved ones, yet the married couple in the film and the relatives who descend upon them for the holidays are all so bitter, sarcastic, and self-absorbed that even a hardened criminal is appalled by them. As the values associated with Christmas are turned on their ear and exposed as empty vanity in today's society, the criminal becomes a cynical sort of antihero: unlike his hostages, he at least remembers what a family is supposed to act like. The film's message was emphasized by the casting of comedian Leary in the title role, casting that capitalized on his reputation as a one-man mouthpiece for the Middle-American cynicism or anti-ideals of the nineties. The fictional commentary of Leary's character was made more believable to the audience because the majority of them were familiar with its similarities to the actual commentary made famous by Leary himself. Rather than the hero creating the star, the star now forms the hero.

The disappearance of the hero-ideal as a separate entity from, or as a model for, the star has led to a second and perhaps more complex problem: with most modern films, there is a peculiar absence of lasting empathy of the audience with the hero. Apart from the rare phenomenon such as Luke Skywalker in Star Wars (1977), not only do modern movie heroes not exist apart from actors in audiences' minds, but they do not stay there for long. Think of Sigourney Weaver as Ripley, savior of humanity from Aliens (1986), Mel Gibson as a Revolutionary War soldier in The Patriot (2000), or Will Smith as an

alien-hunting secret agent in Men in Black II (2002). In fact, this wording reveals just how most moviegoers do think of those heroes--the roles are indistinguishable from the stars--and after audiences see a movie, they no longer associate the character and the film, but rather the actor and the film. The difference between the short shelf life of modern heroes and the staying power of their old-style predecessors is evident if we look at film remakes of novels like Little Women and The Three Musketeers, in which the characters do supersede the actors in importance. But such films only cater to audience nostalgia for the time when those heroes gave cause for belief and hope, when the culture on which they were based held some ideals. These classic heroes may endure in memory, but they will never again have the mythic power that they did once upon a time. To recreate that lasting empathy in a modern context, we need films that can overcome mistaken identity and that contain heroes who are believable and relevant to today's world. Fortunately, in 1997 such a film, and such a hero, came to the screen.

Think of the current film hero as, to borrow a term from The Princess Bride (1987), "mostly dead." Not having died, the hero needs not rebirth but revival or regeneration. To begin regenerating the hero, then, it is necessary to overcome (1) the audience's preconceptions about the stars' relationships to the characters they play, and (2) the failure of recent hero-characters to invoke a lasting empathy in the public. The 1997 film Face/Off can serve as one prototype for overcoming both of these obstacles and thus for resolving once and for all the problem of mistaken identity.

Fig. 2. Stephen Vaughan, Nicolas Cage and John Travolta in Face/Off, 1997, Photofest, New York. The actors switched roles partway through Face/Off, a technique that helped audiences see their characters as figures independent of the actors portraying them.

provide an opportunity to prove  
 fied apart from the star who plays  
 ain characters, hero Sean Archer and  
 St. Martin's, 2004)

villain Castor Troy, undergo surgery that exchanges their faces. The two stars of the film start off playing particular characters, John Travolta as Archer and Nicolas Cage as Troy; but approximately twenty minutes into the film they switch roles. (See Fig. 2.) In an interview for a magazine article, Travolta described his take on imitating his costar:

[Cage's walk is] a saunter almost. It's very specific to Nick's natural gait. And I said if you don't mind, maybe we could use that Nick Cage cadence for the bad guy's voice, too, and I could just adapt that. You know, the way Nick slows down and enunciates and pronunciates. He's almost poetic in his talking. (qtd. in Daly 24)

Director John Woo and others involved in the making of Face/Off seem to have used audience preconceptions about actor-idiosyncrasies being identical to character-idiosyncrasies, purposely emphasized in the beginning of the film, to make the switch-off of actors and roles that much more shocking and real to the audience. They turned mistaken identity against itself. Moviegoers who had seen Cage and Travolta act before, who associated their faces with their body language, found that when the body language remained the same, even with a new face, it was convincing. This disassociation of actor from character negates the second obstacle to regeneration of the hero as well. Without mistaken identity to cloud the issue, Archer was able to create a lasting empathy with the audience. Even after the audience left the darkness of the theater, his character could not be viewed on anything but its own terms.

In 2000, John Woo touched on the theme of mistaken identity again in Mission: Impossible II. Rogue agent Sean Ambrose steals the identity of Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) at several points in the film, using technology and elaborate disguises. In these few

scenes, Tom Cruise shrugs off some of the actor-idiosyncrasies he plays up throughout the rest of the film.

With the complex problem of mistaken identity overcome, what remains is to create a believable hero who is relevant to today's world. In this context, the major challenge is that the model for the old hero, in Western culture at least, is based on the view that a human being is essentially a unified organic whole and can be labeled in some way: as epic hero, romantic hero, tragic hero, swashbuckling hero, western hero, detective hero, and so on. In the contemporary world, we can no longer believe in such a one-dimensional being. In one of the essays in her anthology Simians, Cyborgs, and Women, historian of science Donna J. Haraway claims that our dreams of organic unity and coherence are futile. In their place, she recommends the cyborg figure, which can give us a new dream of ourselves as multiple, surpassing either body or machine (181). In fact, Haraway argues that with our thinking computers, our routine organ transplants and high-technology prostheses, human beings in the late twentieth century were already living in a world of cyborgs--"hybrid[s] of machine and organism, [creatures] of social reality as well as [creatures] of fiction" (149). Much of Haraway's analysis can be applied to the emerging film hero.

The reel hero can no longer exist as a contained organic whole in today's fractured, technology-driven society. The human aspect of the hero has been damaged by mistaken identity to the extent that moviegoers will no longer put an extraordinary amount of faith in it. They no longer want the lie of static perfection given by classic heroes such as Hercules or Robin Hood and betrayed by film stars of Monroe's, and later Barrymore's, generations, but neither will a hero as openly damaged as such stars suffice

in and of itself. Within their realistic heroes, people still want to hold firm to a core of something untainted by human frailties. At just this moment, the cyborg hero has emerged in film.

Again, Face/Off offers a useful demonstration. The character of Archer, a tortured FBI agent who spends years tracking the criminal (Troy) who gunned down his little boy, is not a hero, in the classic sense of the word, nor is he an antihero, in the modern sense of the word. Instead, he is a prototype for the emerging twenty-first-century hero, a figure whose humanity is not perfect but rather is damaged beyond repair (like the American culture's belief in the hero-ideal). To defeat "evil," Archer must use technology to "become" his enemy--literally wear his face and take his place in the world. As Janice Rushing and Thomas Frenzt put it in their book Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in American Film, "to survive, a man must be technological, and to thrive, he must be technologically adept" (147). The new heroes cannot be sustained without the props of the modern world. Technology supplements their human frailties with cyborg prosthetics that give them an inhuman capacity for human salvation. The cyborg image metaphorically compensates for the modern dissonance between the technological and the organic; it uses technology to weld together the fractured nature of contemporary human beings, creating one inhuman whole that is capable of obtaining a limited perfection precisely because of its inhuman state. Archer achieves this state and triumphs—maybe not an angel, not a "golden one," but certainly a cause for hope.

The emergence of cyborg figures in films is not limited to Face/Off. Over the past two decades, the different facets of the cyborg character have been explored in films as diverse as Blade Runner (1982) and Star Trek: First Contact (1996). These portrayals

reflect a deep ambivalence, since many in our culture see the cyborg as a symbol not of hope but of dehumanization, the dead end of the modern world. In Blade Runner, the human hero's job is to hunt down and "cancel" android "replicants" that are "more human than human"; and in First Contact, humans battle to resist "assimilation into the [cy]Borg collective." Steven Spielberg's A.I. (2001) features a twist on the cyborg hero, depicting a robot boy who, like Pinocchio, longs to become "real." In these cases, the films offer positive images of cyborgs as well, suggesting that their future could go either way--or continue to go both ways. Jewel asked the question: "And where's my hope now that my heroes have gone?" Perhaps the 1991 film Terminator 2: Judgment Day provides the answer, one that speaks to the eventual triumph of the cyborg as hero. Turning to human heroes Sarah and John Connor, the cyborg Terminator says simply, "Come with me if you want to live."

Notes

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank those who have contributed to my thinking on this topic, including my professors and classmates, Professor Morris Beja, and two consultants from the Ohio State University Writing Center, Melissa Goldthwaite and Nels Highberg.

<sup>2</sup> The rewritten version of “Candle in the Wind” that John sang at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 is now the best-selling recorded single of all time. Although Diana was not in movies, she was constantly in public view--in newspapers and magazines and on television; she too was caught up in the cult of fame that Monroe experienced. As Diana the person died, Diana the myth was born.

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