

**The Myth of the American Dream as reflected
in Adrian Lyne's *Indecent Proposal* (1993)**

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The aim of this article is to give a brief survey of the development of the American Dream as the national myth of socioeconomic success, based on capitalist competition, and analyze its influence on contemporary American society, as reflected in Adrian Lyne's film *Indecent Proposal*.

As is known, myths are about human nature with all its hopes, desires, fears and needs. However, they also embody the cultural values of any given community as a way of bringing order and meaning to life. Moreover most myths generally emphasize the same point: the search for the self - in other words, the quest myth of self-knowledge. The quest is a spiritual journey, or rather a psychological journey to maturity through which heroes need to define, or 'prove' themselves, and suffer the agony of adult life to gain its reward and to make a name (Leeming 197). Richard Slotkin writes that human beings are "essentially a myth-making animal[s]" (7), and "[m]yth is history successfully disguised as archetype (20) because "myths are stories drawn from history" (16). He also states that American history, replete with myths peculiar to its culture, reflects the mythologization process through the cluster of indigeneous myths called the American Dream of success.

The roots of the American Dream, however, goes back to the concept or the myth of the Frontier in American history. Broadly speaking, the myth of the Frontier is the conception of America as a wide-open, new land of limitless opportunity, a new world, for the strong ambitious and self-reliant individuals to push their way up to the top. It is a place for them to regenerate their fortunes and spirits (Slotkin 32-40). The Frontier, in fact, was "a material condition of life that shaped the behaviour and the ideas of colonists and pioneers" (15). The term Frontier, which literally means border, actually refers to a border between cultivated land where people live (metropolis) and wild land (wilderness). According to Richard Slotkin, the myth of the Frontier, which is a comprehensive and complex mythology, consists of some legends. The concept of the Frontier is always associated with the myth of expansion. In fact, it is the most important and persistent myth which shaped American history and culture. Its "ideological underpinnings are those same "laws" of capitalist competition" (Slotkin 15).

Since myths contain a culture's all ideology, they naturally shape language and discourse. The Frontier Myth not only determined economy and expansion but also shaped cultural discourse down to the present day (15-23). Thus, the common images of the Frontier such as a place of "wind fall profit" of plenty, of magic, of positive transformation, of progressive expansion and of wilderness made the land of the Wild West a Garden of Earthly Delights, a Garden of Eden, a place of fertility and wealth (39). Hence, America, from the time of its settlement by Europeans, was seen as a land of limitless opportunity, a place where human beings could have a second chance to fulfill their mythic longings for a return to paradise, particularly after centuries of poverty and misery. In other words, the Frontier of Edenic possibilities reflected the hope of creating a new paradise in this world.

In the course of American history, the myth of the Frontier gave rise to the myth of the American hero as the mythic New World hero, "who saves the small paradisaal community threatened by evil" (Yanarella and Sigelman 4). The hero who is the combination of individual courage, moral righteousness and sexual renunciation, is also a loner. With his moral purity and innocence, he is a version of Adam before the Fall. However, the American hero, during and after the Fall, is more complex than this uncorrupted "American Adam". He is the central figure of another myth; the American Dream - the dream of success which was also closely related to the myth of initiation. The myth of the Frontier and the American dream consistently sustain a deep Faith in progress which is "rooted in optimism and a belief in the indomitable spirit of individuals" (Hines 84). The idea was that through hard work, courage and determination one can achieve prosperity despite one's humble conditions which is often associated with Puritan work ethic (for, most of the early settlers were Puritans). Some notable capitalists such as John D. Rockefeller, became the new model of the American Dream, controlling enormous great wealth and corporations.

The mythical basis of American culture relies on three principal myths: the myth of the American Eden, the myth of the Fall, and the myth of the Hero's quest with American redemption (Slotkin 85). "The myth of American Eden is a variation on the myth of progress" (86). The idea of progress was also interpreted in economic terms as "an increase in wealth, of productive capacity, of levels of consumption from year to year and decade to decade" (33). Thus, progress as the underlying idea of the Frontier myth generated and supported the expansion of capitalism. Nevertheless, the myth of New Eden as a variation on the myth of the inevitable progress together with the myth of the Fall, and the myth of the hero's quest and redemption; his

The Myth of the American Dream in Adrian Lyne's *Indecent Proposal* (1993)

painful transformation from Edenic innocence to experience, have shaped American history and politics as well as its culture. Today, scholars keep analyzing this relationship between American history and literature as well as American history and popular culture, particularly in popular fiction and in cinema, because all these cultural and political myths form the essential background of American literary tradition and popular culture, and American literature and contemporary popular culture seem to represent the same themes, patterns, images, and symbols; the variations on the myth of American Dream.

According to John Cawelti, the various genres in contemporary popular fiction such as romance, western, horror and science fiction, thrillers, detective and spy stories, always have highly predictable plot structures that fulfill the most conventional expectations of readers. For Cawelti, these narratives are formulas in which specific cultural patterns, themes, and archetypes of any particular culture are combined with more universal story patterns and archetypes of primitive cultures. Formula stories reflect the construction of an ideal world where all conflicts are finally resolved and order is maintained (13) as in the case of mainstream Hollywood cinema which is a mode of narrative for contemporary mythmaking (Hayward 66).

The narrative of the classic Hollywood cinema, no matter what genre it is, should follow the triad order/disorder/order restored. One of the most obvious genres in which this paradigm occurs is the romance, that generally focuses on a relationship between a man and a woman, centering on the overcoming of social and psychological difficulties to prove that only love is fully satisfying. This is evident in Adrian Lyne's *Indecent Proposal* (1993) (based on the novel by Jack Engelhard), which may be read as a masculine romance in which a female becomes "the object of desire" for a male (McCracken 119), or between two males which leads to their rivalry. The film, as a Hollywood romance, seems to reflect all the above-mentioned, romance qualities with its surface structure with the boy meeting the girl, losing her; and finally winning her back. It overcomes all obstacles and difficulties which is the moral fantasy of the romance, and the film seems to reflect it through the hero David's (Woody Harrelson) quest and his final confrontation with his rival, John Gage (Robert Redford) to win his wife, Diana (Demi Moore) back (the typical masculine romance triangle). As a masculine romance story, Lyne's film embodies the (hero's) quest archetypal pattern. Thus, it naturally includes the Initiation (the Fall), the Transformation (the Redemption) archetypes as well as the death/regeneration (rebirth) cycle. The pattern of the story, the event and characters, all correspond to the three principal myths: Eden, the Fall and the Hero/Redemption myths which

constitute the American Dream of success. David, the hero epitomizes the archetype of the American Adam who lives with his Eve (Diana) in his American Eden, longing to build his "dream house" and prove himself as an architect which means success. Unfortunately, hit by the 1992-93 recession, David is dismissed from his job and they have fallen behind on their mortgage payments which means they will lose David's half-built dream house. Desperately, they go to Las Vegas where they meet John Gage (Robert Redford) a middle-aged billionaire at the tables who is instantly attracted to Diana. Gage, in an attempt to have her away from her husband, insists that money can buy individuals, even love. Then he makes his "indecent proposal" to the couple that he will give them one million dollars for one night with his Diana. However, being naive enough, they are ignorant about the ways of the world. An encounter with the world of realities, is a sin like the eating of the forbidden fruit. Therefore, the couple, though refusing his proposal first, get confused. Then, yielding to the temptation of money to build David's dream house, they agree to make a deal with Gage (the devil as David's lawyer calls him) who is the embodiment of wealth and success. After sending Diana to Gage, David realizes what he has done and weeps bitterly like a child. His Fall begins. David, unable to forget that very night, turns extremely jealous, particularly, after the loss of the half built dream house, sold by the bank as they have been late to pay their mortgage payments when they were in Las Vegas. The discovery of the fact that the house has been bought by Gage, makes David even more jealous and they are separated after terrible quarrels without demanding the money. The Fall, as a transformation from innocence to experience, is a very painful period for David. His pain grows even more when Diana becomes Gage's partner after their separation. He withdraws into his little room with his only companion, his faithful dog, as a passive and utterly despondent lover (the withdrawal of the wounded hero archetype). Yet, his passivity soon gives way to his resurrection as he realizes he cannot live without Diana's love, and he fights till he wins her back. The story is David's quest, his spiritual journey to self-knowledge, which is his spiritual regeneration, or rebirth - symbolized in this film through water imagery. The heavy rain shower, when David challenges Gage openly that he is not afraid of him, symbolizes the death of David's former personality, which is also the beginning of his purification and resurrection. Likewise a lovely shower or rain suddenly pours down in the auction-scene when David suddenly appears to buy the hippopotamus (obviously the metaphor for John Gage) for Diana for one million dollars which is his response to John as well as his sacrifice for Diana. The fall from the American Eden is painful, even traumatic. Samuel M. Hines, Jr, states that one of the most important consequences of American Edenic myths is their

The Myth of the American Dream in Adrian Lyne's *Indecent Proposal* (1993)

emphasis on the element of individual choice as critical in determining whether the final outcome of human action will be good or bad (Hynes 87), and the film clearly reflects it.

The griffin, in the mythic content of the film is another mythological symbol associated with John Gage. It is the name of Gage's yacht. In Greek mythology, it has three different spellings: Griffin, Griffon, Gryphon. It is a mythological creature with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion as the picture on the box of matches reflects in the film. The griffin is "a fabulous animal, symbolically significant for its domination of both the earth and the sky- because of its lion's body and eagle's head and wings (Biederman 158). Obviously, it symbolizes Gage, as the embodiment of power and wealth.

The film also embodies Jung's universal archetypes of the human psyche: the persona or the hero (David), the shadow (John Gage) the darker side of the hero's conscious self, his opposite, his rival, the villain; yet his double, his other self as it appears in certain typical forms in ancient myths: Cain and Abel. The shadow figure both repels and attracts the hero as Gage attracts David in the beginning with his money and power, yet repels him as well. In other words, the film also reflects the poststructuralist view that the subject in this contemporary world, is not a unified, fixed self. However, *Indecent Proposal* is a mainstream Hollywood product, that shies away from this doubleness in favor of order. David, unconsciously through his "dream-house" creates his self-image by projecting his unified mirror image on to it as a socio-cultural requirement and tries to be a part of the capitalist system. However his reunion with Diana is the restoration of the previous order before his failure. This is simply the pattern of classic narrative cinema such as Hollywood, which according to Terry Eagleton is a genre wherein an original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored. And from this perspective, "narrative is the source of consolation" (161) because the restoration of the loss pleases and consoles us even in narrative. Eagleton states that classic narrative of the realist kind "slides our anxiety at absence under the comforting sign of presence" (161). In this way, we conform to social reality as 'natural' rather than critically questioning it; we remain in the Imaginary (162).

Such ideology, according to Roland Barthes, is a kind of contemporary mythology whose function is to 'naturalize' social reality, and to make it seem innocent and unchangeable like Nature itself, viz, it seeks to convert culture into Nature (117). Myth empties social reality of history by naturalizing it, and in this way it purifies it, makes it seem innocent and gives it a natural and eternal justification. In this sense, it is a depoliticized speech

(142-143). Myth, as a depoliticizing, naturalizing and universalizing discourse is best reflected in mainstream (classic) cinema such as Hollywood where the world is naturally shown as white, bourgeois, heterosexual, patriarchal and capitalist. In this 'naturalized' world discourses operate in such a way that class, race and gender inequalities are represented as normal and natural (Hayward 258). After all, cinema is an ideological apparatus by nature because of its seamlessness. We can not see how it produces meaning easily. For example, in *Indecent Proposal*, the effects of the 1992-3 recession are never analyzed or interrogated but rather taken for granted through the film's mythic structure (its classical narrative). In other words, it postulates a version of the American Dream that valorizes individual enterprise and success irrespective of social class and origins. Gage, in particular represents the contemporary romantic hero who's supposed to be successful and powerful. Meanwhile David's desire to build his "dream house", his fear of losing Diana and Diana's sacrifice for him seem more understandable, particularly, within the boundaries of the romance-film genre. David and Diana are reunited even without money and success, because love conquers all. It looks as if the film offers love as a remedy, or a substitute for success to console those who fail in the system. Thus, the film, with its goal-oriented narrative only contributes to the maintenance of the capitalist system.

However, it also reflects the corrupt state of the American Dream, particularly in our contemporary world today. In fact, *Indecent Proposal* is a film about the commodification of dreams and the American Dream is "a dream of the commodity" and "status" (Tyson 5-7), with "the implied premise" that "one's own spiritual worth and well being are directly proportional to the value of the commodities one owns" (5). Everything can be commodified including love and "human relations" (7) as long as they have any exchange value assigned by human beings. In the film, Diana's body, her beauty and her youth are commodified and sold. Likewise, David's dream house is commodified, firstly, through the deal he has made with John Gage, that he needs money to build his dream house, and then secondly, when John Gage buys it. John Gage, the image of socioeconomic success, also admits that he buys people every day in business, and therefore he wants to buy love as well. Love is also commodified when the couple accepts his proposal, although Diana insists that it is only her body, not her soul.

According to Lois Tyson, "[o]ne of the central paradoxes of the American dream is that, while it claims to open history to everyone, to allow each individual the opportunity to become a part of American history " (141) through hard work, ambition and enterprise; in reality it closes off history by

The Myth of the American Dream in Adrian Lyne's *Indecent Proposal* (1993)

allowing each individual to escape into the commodity (p.141). Indeed, today, The American Dream is characterized by an affluent way of life that is often associated with "money madness" rather than men of ambition and enterprise whose "success contributed to the prosperity and greatness" of the American nation (Tyson 5-6). Lois Tyson in her *Psychological Politics of the American Dream* also argues that the American Dream is inherently a commodified dream whose ideological structure includes the equation of both material and spiritual fulfillment as well as the seductive and corruptive motivations (16). For her, this is the irony revealed in the literature of the American Dream (e.g. *The Great Gatsby*, *Death of a Salesman*, etc) that people are more aware of recently (6). Therefore, for Tyson "The American Dream" and "commodity" are the terms that are "virtually interchangeable", because, The American Dream is "the ideological apparatus of the commodity" (6). In this respect, *Indecent Proposal* is a film that reflects this commodification process of the American Dream with its seductive appeal, particularly for those who are naive enough like David and Diana.

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