

Opinion

A Tale of Two Heroes and Their Creators and What This Illustrates About Past and Current Political and Social Cultures A Short Supposition

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Abstract

Dickens, in A Tale of Two Cities, asked the question of how two societies alike in many ways could be so different during the French Revolution. Philosophers and religious figures have pondered this question since antiquity and continue to do so presently. It is apparent that humans, who are social by nature, are enmeshed by time and space in the political and social cultures they inhabit. Thus, England at that time was relatively stable, where disagreements were often expressed through political and social institutions and, at times, through protest. France, on the other hand, possessed a culture in which many people felt oppressed, eventually reaching a boiling point. Many lost their lives, including the reigning monarchs. This summer, two movies have been released concerning archetypal heroes, Odysseus and Robin Hood. Both arguably present well-made tales. Some elements are shared, while others are different. One has received substantial attention and is positioned as a major theatrical event, while the other is more obscure and offers audiences a substantially different interpretation of a familiar hero. The performances in the two films also invite consideration of how audiences and the film industry recognize acting and filmmaking achievement. Our journey is to examine this phenomenon, trying to better understand these movies using several valid criteria. Second, and maybe more importantly, we view this journey as a metaphor. What does this say about how our society uses cinema, not only to entertain but also to provide information, some of which may function as propaganda?

Introduction

Since antiquity, religious figures and philosophers have asked questions about what is happening to us and why through religion [1], philosophy [2], and history [3]. This trio of disciplines, despite having different interests and methodologies, shares several recurring concerns. First, one must be skeptical of methods and conclusions. However, there is a confluence of opinion on certain issues [Table 1].

Table 1: Selected Lessons and Recurring Themes of History

No.	Theme
1	Importance of the physical environment
2	Importance of biology
3	Importance of character
4	Importance of morals
5	Importance of economics
6	Importance of religion
7	Importance of race
8	Importance of social justice
9	Socialism and history
10	War and history
11	Cycles of growth and decay
12	Is there progress?

This is a modification of the Durants' chapters, which highlight areas that are addressed by the three disciplines. This illustrates that humans exist in a physical environment. They are physical beings who are social and rational, and behavior in private and in public is expected to be consistent with the standards of the political and social system in which they live. As society becomes more diverse and complex, other issues such as race, social justice, and socialism arise. However, people are also irrational and violent at times. Thus, wars have ravaged humankind and the environment, both naturally occurring and man-made.

Others subsequently have addressed these issues more recently than the Durants, using recent empirical findings and noting historical events [4-6]. They bolster the observations that, since antiquity, humans have had the capacity for cruelty and slavery toward others, yet also manifest empathy and kindness. Ambiguity is an essential feature of the human condition, as Freud noted [7]. Yet there are psychological and spiritual needs for humans to have a purpose. Thus, myths of heroes and concepts of gods have occupied an important place in human minds and cultures.

The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a seminal work based on religious and anthropological studies. He found that this myth spans recorded time throughout the world [8]. This is a theme spanning many

fields. The Greeks have many instances of this throughout millennia. There are multiple instances in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries [9]. Philosophy has had its view on this topic [10], as have religion [11] and psychology [12]. A person making a journey operates on levels beyond the physical. It discourages passivity and inactivity, which are significant concerns in many societies worldwide today [13,14]. It has been an observation since antiquity that actively engaging the environment is healthy for body and mind [15,16]. Huizinga, a Dutch philosopher, further examined how play, including sports, from Plato to modern times has importantly shaped societies [17]. The concept of the hero's journey is influential, although its application to different cultures and narratives has also been debated. For the purposes of this supposition, it provides a useful framework for considering why societies repeatedly return to stories involving journeys, trials, transformation, and heroic figures.

A Tale of Two Cities

The eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries were times of significant change. Advances in science and technology changed their societies in many ways. Charles Dickens, in the nineteenth century, pondered how two cultures, England and France, could be so alike yet different, with devastating consequences, in *A Tale of Two Cities* [18]. Therein, he presented the political and social environment in which all people, including the different social classes, lived, as an important factor. Those in England were in a society where there was a gradual evolution of governmental power, merging diverse regions geographically and culturally into a common national identity and allowing certain political powers to be shared. Locally, peoples preserved many of their traditions, while nationally, traditions of free speech and varied means of political protest had evolved over centuries [19]. France, unfortunately, followed a different historical and political course, and a massive loss of life occurred while property was destroyed [20]. The comparison should not be interpreted as suggesting that the two societies were simply alike or that their historical differences can be explained by one factor. Rather, Dickens provides a useful literary framework for considering how political and social environments can influence human behavior. Through the ensuing times, many types of journeys, physically through land, sea, and air, proceeded. Communication systematically improved from the telegraph and telephone to radio and then television. Table 2 shows this idea.

Table 2: Progression of Virtual Storytelling

Stage	Form of Storytelling
1	Words
2	Pictures
3	Pictures with sound
4	Pictures with advanced auxiliary features
5	Immersive virtual reality

The phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” has appeared since antiquity in various forms [22]. Marshall McLuhan in the twentieth century made observations concerning the power of media and had the insight that types of media were capable not only of entertaining but also of being effective means of spreading propaganda, understood here as information or persuasion intended to influence political or social attitudes [23]. Entertainment has progressed from live shows to motion pictures, which further evolved from the silent silver screen to the multisensory experience that modern facilities provide. A director is similar to an orchestra conductor. He or she directs the multiple components of this enterprise and is also responsible for the overall vision of the movie, dictating filming techniques, choice of actors, story development, its pace, and ways of introducing actors’ roles. The director merges the visual with a musical score that emotionally affects the audience, fostering an experience in which they become actual participants [24]. The life experience of the director is an important factor in how these decisions are made and, thus, how the story is rendered. However, the relationship between a filmmaker’s personal history and creative choices is complex and should be regarded as interpretive rather than deterministic.

A Story of Two Directors [25,26]

Table 3 shows several traits that I think are essential to understanding their approach to their recent movies.

Table 3: Traits of Two Directors [23-27].

Category	Christopher Nolan	Michael Sarnoski
Birth	England, 1970	USA, 1995
Education	Haileybury and Imperial Service College; University College London	University School of Milwaukee; Yale University
Professional Background	Director, writer, producer	Director, writer, producer
Filmography	Independent films beginning in 1998; major studio films beginning in the early 2000s	Pig (2021); A Quiet Place: Day One (2024)
Recognition	Multiple awards from various organizations; knighted in the United Kingdom	Awards and recognition for his work
Production Context	Large-scale studio productions	Smaller-scale and independent-oriented productions

There are a few similarities between the directors, most notably that they have each developed distinctive approaches to cinema. They learned and practiced their craft and, in so doing, found ways of creating stories that were unique and praiseworthy. Christopher Nolan is a member of Generation X. Members [28] are between the Baby Boomers and the Millennial generation. His formative years occurred during a period of substantial political, social, and technological change. Several entertainment outlets were arising, including computers, cable television, and music videos, with MTV merging music and visuals. These changed the way people experienced music, although

this harkened back to earlier developments in cinema. Christopher, born in the UK, had a different experience from those in America. Thus, one can arguably posit that his relatively privileged upbringing and educational environment provided a background that may have influenced his later development as a filmmaker. His films have also addressed social and political themes, although a direct causal relationship between his childhood and particular themes in his films cannot be established from biographical information alone. Michael, on the other hand, is an early member of Generation Z [29]. It is a very diverse generation in many ways and for many reasons. Those born earlier had advantages in technology, but they were introduced to major advances, including smartphones and social networks, later than their younger siblings. They are more familiar with these technologies and platforms than previous generations. That said, generational characteristics should not be treated as determining an individual's creative style. Sarnoski and his collaborators have worked in a smaller production environment than Nolan's recent large-scale studio productions. This may provide greater flexibility in some aspects of filmmaking, although the actual degree of creative independence varies from project to project.

Movie Studios

Table 4 is a short description of the studios involved. Nolan's recent work has included major studio productions, while Sarnoski's career has included smaller-scale and independent-oriented productions.

Table 4: Summary of Studios [30].

Category	Universal Pictures	A24
Established	1912	2012
Organization	Major entertainment organization	Independent entertainment company
Film Production	Major motion pictures	Independent and specialty films
Other Activities	Theme parks, video games, and other entertainment activities	Television and film projects
Production Scale	Large-scale productions and blockbusters	Smaller-scale and independent films
Distribution	Distribution partnerships	Distribution partnerships

Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* was released theatrically in July 2026 through Universal Pictures. The film was shot using IMAX film cameras and was presented as a large-scale mythic epic [30]. Michael Sarnoski's *The Death of Robin Hood* was released in 2026 through A24. The film offers a darker and more personal interpretation of the familiar Robin Hood legend [31]. The difference in production scale is relevant to the present discussion. It does not necessarily mean that one filmmaker has greater artistic independence than the other. Rather, it illustrates that filmmakers work within different industrial environments, with different resources, audiences, expectations, and distribution systems. This is an ever-changing subject for many reasons [29]. A final piece to this puzzle is the rise of tribalism and ideology over the past century.

Tribalism and Ideology

Tribalism is a social arrangement in which people are bound by family, land, customs, or other shared identities that distinguish one group from another. E. E. Evans-Pritchard studied related forms of social organization years ago [32]. Others [33] more recently have studied this social construct using more powerful investigative tools and have found both negative and positive aspects of group identification. Ideology is a related concept. It can involve the tendency of people to interpret society through a particular political or ideological lens, using that framework to explain societal behavior [34]. This can become especially important when a society experiences a loss of social cohesion. National traditions, which were once observed more uniformly in some societies, may subsequently become contested or denigrated. Today in the USA, political disagreement is substantial, and some groups disagree not only on policy but also on interpretations of facts and evidence. Such polarization is an important issue for contemporary democratic societies. The Overton Window, however, refers more specifically to the range of political ideas or policies that are regarded as acceptable or politically possible at a particular time [35]. It is therefore better understood as a framework for examining how the boundaries of acceptable political discussion may shift, rather than simply as a description of political disagreement. A healthy, functioning society requires some degree of shared understanding and social cohesion, while disagreement and political debate are also essential features of democratic life. During periods of severe societal disruption, the balance between these forces can change. People in the political middle may seek governmental changes intended to make society more civil and functional.

Political Microtargeting and Media Influence

Political microtargeting is the use of detailed information about voters or narrowly defined groups to deliver tailored political messages. It differs from ordinary polling because its purpose is not simply to measure opinion. It involves identifying particular audiences and attempting to communicate with them using messages suited to their characteristics or interests. Political microtargeting has become an important subject of scholarly discussion because data-driven communication can potentially increase the precision of political campaigning while also raising concerns about privacy, manipulation, autonomy, and democratic deliberation. However, it is important not to assume that the same technique is automatically responsible for changes in every sector of society. My supposition is more limited. Techniques developed or refined in political communication may influence other sectors, including education, advertising, entertainment, and media. If increasingly sophisticated audience segmentation is used to determine which stories are produced, promoted, or emphasized, then cinema may also become affected. This is an area where further empirical research is required. The present article therefore treats the possibility as a hypothesis or supposition rather than as an established fact.

Concluding Thoughts

I have compared two directors who currently have a summer movie based on legendary figures, Nolan [Odysseus] and Sarnoski [Robin Hood]. I argue that this comparison provides a useful metaphor for understanding these movies and culture in general. First, I present arguments from religion, philosophy, and history, which raise similar questions and present recurrent lessons. Second, I present the ever-present myth of the hero's journey, supplying knowledge from diverse sources. Third, I present demographic data of the directors, their work, and their relationships to personal and professional associations. Fourth, I present briefly the history of cinema and its ability not only to entertain but also to affect people in a profound fashion, as predicted by McLuhan. Fifth, I present what I deem the last piece of this phenomenon, the rise of tribalism and ideology, caused at least in part by a breakdown of important features needed in all functioning and healthy societies. This has happened at several points in the past in connection with major societal disruptions and technological advances, including writing, the invention of the printing press, developments in the biological sciences, psychiatry, neuroscience, and information technology, including AI. I propose that persuasion techniques,

including propaganda, in concert with the above factors, may be contributing to another period of worldwide disruption today, although the nature and causes of that disruption remain subjects of debate. Sixth, I examine the possible use of political microtargeting and related data-driven communication techniques, which have had marked importance in political campaigns. I suggest that similar approaches may increasingly influence other sectors of society, including entertainment.

This does not prove that microtargeting explains the state of cinema or determines the nature of these two films. Rather, it provides a useful question for further consideration: to what extent are modern audiences, filmmakers, studios, and distributors influenced by increasingly sophisticated methods of identifying, segmenting, and communicating with particular audiences? That question brings us back to the original comparison with Dickens. Societies create cultures, cultures influence people, and people in turn create stories that reflect their time. The hero may therefore tell us not only about the past, but also about ourselves and the society in which the story is being told.

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