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Ancient Myths in Contemporary Cinema: Oedipus Rex and Perceval the Knight of the Holy Grail in *Pulp Fiction* and *The Sixth Sense*

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Abstract

A study of two contrasting myths of fathers and sons— the stories of Oedipus and Percival, which Claude Lévi-Strauss saw as in many ways inverse images of each other—in a number of contemporary films, focusing most closely on *Pulp Fiction* and *The Sixth Sense*.

Additional Keywords

Chinatown (film); Indiana Jones (films); Lévi-Strauss, Claude; Oedipus figures in literature; Percival figures in literature; Pulp Fiction (film); The Sixth Sense (film); Star Wars (film series)



ANCIENT MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY
CINEMA: OEDIPUS REX AND
PERCEVAL THE KNIGHT OF THE
HOLY GRAIL IN *PULP FICTION*
AND *THE SIXTH SENSE*

INBAR SHAHAD

THE GRAIL ROMANCE IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS TALES in Medieval Romance and a major source of inspiration for works in literature, theatre and music, from Wagner's *Parsifal* to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ Explicit and implicit allusions to the tale also appear in many films: e.g. *The Fisher King* (Terry Gilliam, US, 1991) is a sort of a continuation to the story; and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, US, 1989) is constructed as the final sequel to the story.² The same is true for the myth of Oedipus. Following the modern interpretation of the Oedipal myth suggested by Freud, one can find explicit and implicit allusion to it in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg, and many more (Winkler).

In this essay I shall demonstrate the manifestations of components of both myths in current North-American "mythology"—i.e. in Hollywood films. I shall show, through a close reading of *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, US, 1994) and *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, US, 1999), that the Grail story offers, among other things, an alternative pattern regarding father and son relationships to the one in the Oedipal story. As an alternative pattern, allusions to the Perceval myth can be found in texts of popular culture alongside allusions to the Oedipal paradigm, 'independently,' or antagonistically to it.

The meaningful relationships among motifs in the deep structure of the two myths were extensively analyzed by Claude Lévi-Strauss:³ watching the grail, Perceval dare not ask "whom does it serve?", thus failing his mission. Based on this pivotal event, Lévi-Strauss stresses the structural dichotomy between the wise Oedipus, solver of riddles (the riddle of the Sphinx, the

¹A good and extensive summary of Chrétien de Troyes' version of the grail myth (which is considered to be the first literary version [circa 1180]), and also of later versions and continuations, can be found in Loomis.

²On other films borrowing from this rich tradition, see, for example, Arden and Lorenz.

³His 1960 article "The Scope of Anthropology" was translated to English in 1976. Lévi-Strauss continued his comparative analysis of various grail stories from cultures all over the world. His later findings appear in "The Grail in America and Addendum."

mystery of the origin of the plague in Thebes), and Perceval the innocent, the ignorant, who does not ask the right question at the right time.

The two heroes are contrasted in other respects: Oedipus finds himself in incestuous relations, while Perceval remains chaste. In Indian (Native American) versions of the Oedipal myth, the hero must banish an eternal winter by solving riddles. In the grail myth, the hero must revive a wasteland: he must banish eternal summer (Lévi-Strauss, "Scope" 23).

Lévi-Strauss comes to the conclusion that both myths deal with social exchange: of words (in a conversation) and of women (in matrimony). Using natural phenomena such as plague and drought, each myth presents an aberrant social behavior that should be avoided: decadent promiscuity (represented by eternal winter), and extreme chastity (represented by the threat of eternal summer). Thus, the natural change of seasons functions as a basis for an argument in favor of exchange of women between families and exchange of words in an open and honest conversation.

In my opinion, there are other contrasting details. First, Perceval and Oedipus differ in their relations with father figures. Oedipus encounters an old man on his way, gets into a fight with him and kills him. Long afterwards he discovers their familial bond—he had killed his father. Perceval too encounters an old man on his way, a crippled fisher (in a later version, he meets the fisher king), but they form an amicable rapport. Perceval fails to heal his host. Long afterwards, he too discovers their familial bond—his host is his uncle (or cousin in some versions). In Robert de Boron's version, Perceval's second visit to the castle ends with the healing of the fisher king. The patricidal relations of Oedipus and Laius are thus contrasted with the therapeutic relations of Perceval and the fisher king.⁴

Moreover, the lineage of each hero has a special part in both stories: the cause of Oedipus's tragic fate is a curse laid upon his father; while Perceval discovers that he is the heir to a long series of grail guardians.

At the symbolic level, both myths relate to relationships between fathers and sons. Healing of a father figure by a son figure means symbolically the acceptance of the fact that the father is getting old and weak, and it is now the

⁴ At the end of Robert de Boron's version we discover that the fisher is Perceval's uncle on his mother side. This fact has special meaning in matrilineal cultures (such as the Celtic culture), where the mother's brother functions as father to his sister's children. Chrétien's version contains several other father figures for Perceval: the knights whom he wishes to join at the beginning of the tale, King Arthur (whom Perceval tries to impress and whose order he tries to join) and Gornement who teaches him the chivalric code. All these men are role models that Perceval aspires to emulate.

son's turn to take over the role of caregiver. Inheriting the socio-religious role of "the guardian of the grail" can thus be interpreted as a symbolic proof of Perceval's having reached psychic maturity.⁵ According to this interpretation, the heroes' belated recognition of their fathers also has symbolic meaning: it means they could not till now see their fathers other than from the narrow and selfish perspective of a child. Thus, both stories are about growing up: Oedipus's unsuccessful path to maturity ends in blindness and exile; where as Perceval's successful maturation (in the sequels to Chrétien's story) ends in him saving a king and country and reaching a state of grace (which is the religious meaning of the grail).

Thus, the two stories together, at their symbolic-mythic level, represent the dual relation of sons to their fathers: every man, like Oedipus, feels hostility toward his father (or father figures), an urge to break free from their authority; and every man, like Perceval, also feels an opposite urge, to heal a flawed father figure, to preserve an ideal of paternal authority. As mentioned above, the contrast between the two myths—which can now be phrased in terms of contrasting urges in a child's psyche—can be found in numerous films, in the form of systematic allusions to both myths. In *Pulp Fiction* the system of allusions to these myths is particularly rich and complex.

Pulp Fiction: *Butch as an Oedipus and as a Perceval figure*

The connection of *Pulp Fiction* to the medieval romance tradition has been discussed in several articles (Terkla and Reed, Jewers). Allusions to the grail story are especially conspicuous in the story of Butch (Bruce Willis), the fighter who is ordered to throw a fight by an L.A. Mafia boss. Like Perceval, Butch is the only child of his widowed mother, and like Perceval, his father too was a warrior.

According to Fried and Dowell, Butch's singular attachment to his father's watch can be explained in terms of the grail romance: like Perceval who inherits the sacred role of the "Guardian of the Grail" (in Robert de Boron's version), Butch inherits the role of the "Guardian of the Watch" from his father, and in the spirit of family tradition and the heroic ethos of his ancestors, he is willing to risk his life defending it. Notwithstanding the irony implied in the way the watch is passed from father to son, an irony that reduces the significance of the original holy grail, the watch nevertheless has a mystic quality: just like the grail, it protects its guardians. Butch risks his life when he tries to recover the watch, and his efforts are well rewarded. At the end of a strange chain of events, his death sentence, declared by the Mafia boss, is reduced to banishment from the "kingdom," as was customary in chivalric culture during the Middle Ages, as

⁵ For a symbolic-Jungian interpretation of the story, see Jung and Von Franz.

well as in modern-day gangster culture. Butch leaves for a new life, along with the watch, his sweetheart, and a new motorcycle named Grace—a name implying that Butch has reached the same desired goal as Perceval—divine grace, a desire also shared by many knights and Christian worshippers.

However, the order of events in *Pulp Fiction* differs from that in the grail story: Butch starts off as a guardian of the watch, while Perceval acquires a similar role only at the end of his story. In both cases, however, our heroes are fatherless children, who accomplish tasks that other knights/warriors fail to achieve.

It seems that Butch functions as a Perceval figure despite his age. In fact, casting “grown children” as Perceval figures is not uncommon in films, as is the case with Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest* (Alfred Hitchcock, US, 1959), Max Cohen in *Pi* (Darren Aronofsky, US, 1998) and more explicitly, Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and Jack Lucas in *The Fisher King*. All these characters achieve successful maturation, corroborating the message of Chrétien’s version: it is never too late to repent, or to grow up.

The adventures of Butch contain not only allusions to the grail story but also allusions to the Oedipal story. Already in a flashback to his childhood, there is an allusion to an Oedipal motif. The flashback begins in a clip from a TV cartoon young Butch is watching. In the clip, from *Clutch Cargo* (Phil Booth, US, 1959), an Eskimo kid laughs at his dog, who mistook the totem pole for a real live animal. This image relates to the Freudian interpretation of the Oedipal myth: Freud explains in *Totem and Taboo* that the ban to kill a totem animal is a symbol of the ban to kill a primal father. According to Freud, the whole totem system exemplifies the universality of the Oedipus complex. Young Butch thus watches cartoons starring a kid like him, who knows the symbolic meaning of totem poles: they are not real animals, but representations of fathers one should respect. As his story illustrates, this issue, of how to relate to father figures, becomes particularly charged for Butch in later years.

His urge to rebel against father figures is vigorously expressed in his relationship with Marcellus Wallace, the authoritative Mafia boss. Butch ignores Wallace’s explicit demand, wins the fight, and runs off with the money he had received in order to lose the fight. This betrayal makes them sworn enemies. The following events lead to a change in their relationship, which now reflects a Perceval-fisher king pattern: Butch restores their relationship when he risks his life and saves Wallace from a certain and violent death. The symbolic meaning usually attached to the fisher king handicap in the grail story—the thigh injury or paralyzed legs are a symbol of the fisher king’s impotence—receives here a grotesque presentation in the sexual assault on Wallace. (In any case, the chivalric deeds of Butch in *Pulp Fiction*, contrary to those of Perceval in the

medieval tale, do not save any kingdom: Los Angeles, as depicted in the film, remains a desolate country, full of danger to both gangsters and the innocent).

Butch completes an Oedipal trajectory in his relationship with another father figure—Vincent Vega, one of Wallace’s soldiers. Vincent is sent to kill Butch for disobeying Wallace, but fate intervenes, and Butch kills him instead, with the same weapon intended for his own demise. The Oedipal meaning of this accidental killing derives from an intertextual knowledge: despite the lack of a significant age difference between Butch and Vincent, they are both portrayed by two actors who had played a son (Bruce Willis) and a father (John Travolta) in another film, *Look Who’s Talking Now* (Amy Heckerling, US, 1989). Thus, Butch has complex relationships with two father figures: He kills one ‘father’ in a manner similar to Oedipus, and he saves another in a manner similar to Perceval.

Bruce Willis also stars in the next film I am going to analyze. As I will show, the chain of intertextual allusions that began with Greek mythology and medieval romance continues and accumulates meaning in contemporary films.

Percevalian and Oedipal figures in *The Sixth Sense*

In what sense does *The Sixth Sense* relate to the medieval grail stories?⁶ As in *Pulp Fiction*, there are no typical romance components in it: the story takes place in current-day Chicago, so there are no knights, castles, damsels in distress, feudal lords, etc. Allusions to the grail romance must be implied, if at all present.

The film opens with the return of Dr. Malcolm Crowe, a child psychoanalyst, and his wife Anna, from an event in which he had been honored by the mayor of Philadelphia for his professional achievements. Their celebration at home is abruptly cut off by Vincent Grey, a former child patient of the doctor, who has come to take his revenge upon Crowe for his inability to cure him. The miserable Grey shoots the doctor and then himself. The scene ends in a fade-out. The following scene starts with a caption: The Next Fall. Shyamalan uses cinematic devices in order to mislead the spectators: the cinematic syntax marks a passage of time, but in fact hides a transition from an objective reality to a subjective one. From now till the end of the film, we are attached to the live conscience of a dead man: Dr. Crowe. He and the spectators are both unaware of the fact that he is dead and that he now functions as a narrator-reflector of the film.⁷

⁶ According to Kevin Harty, in interviews with M. Night Shyamalan, the director and scriptwriter of the film, he did not mention the Arthurian Romance as a source of inspiration for the film. Harty’s article offers a preliminary observation of the similarity between the main characters in the film and the characters of King Arthur and Merlin. It has no reference to the grail story.

⁷ Some scenes are depicted from the point of view of Cole Sear. On characters functioning as narrators-reflectors see Sternberg 276-305, 323-24.

The proximity of the celebration to the harsh criticism in the first scene of the film resembles a scene in the middle of the story of Perceval: When Perceval returns to King Arthur after his first visit to the Grail Castle, the court holds a banquet in his honor. The celebration is interrupted by the sudden appearance of an old hag, who condemns Perceval for not having asked the much-awaited question when he had encountered the grail. The public insult spurs Perceval into setting off again and seeking the solution to the grail riddle. In a sense, Dr. Crowe, or to be exact, Dr. Crowe's spirit, reacts in the same way to Grey's accusations. Like Perceval, his spirit too continues to "wander" and seek an answer to a puzzle: what ails Grey, or indeed, what ails Cole Sear, another disturbed child patient with similar symptoms to those suffered by Grey. Crowe's effort to compensate for his earlier failure with Vincent Grey, through a successful treatment of his new patient, Cole Sear, is another variation on the "second chance" motif which is central in de Boron's version of the grail story. Dr. Crowe ventures on a quest, unaware of his non-physical state, much like Perceval who forgets his own name until the morning after the visit to the castle. Although his is a strange quest, of a soul with no body, the journey ends successfully, as it does in de Boron's tale: Dr. Crowe discovers the cause of his patients' sufferings, and moves on—his wife is now free to find a new love and Cole Sear and his mother are reconciled.

This allusionistic interpretation organizes many of the events depicted in the film according to the myth of Perceval. However, Dr. Crowe's occupation also encourages a psychoanalytic interpretation of the events and interrelationships.⁸ Moreover, the exposition – the murder of Dr. Crowe by Grey, a troubled child patient – seems to refer explicitly to the Oedipus complex. The former patient kills the doctor who has been unable to heal his psyche, by realizing a wild fantasy to kill a hostile father figure. Immediately after the murder, Grey kills himself, and his suicide also fits the Freudian claim of the importance of overcoming the Oedipus complex en route to a healthy mental development (Freud, "Special Type"). Dr. Crowe thus functions as a Percevalian character in his relationships with Cole Sear, Lynn Sear and his wife, and as a Laius figure for Vincent Grey.

The name of the new child patient, Cole Sear, also functions in the system of allusions to the Romance. Sear, as his name implies, has a calling, a spiritual-mystic role: he is a se-er of dead people, i.e., he has the ability to communicate with the dead. Another name connected to the Arthurian legends is the doctor's surname—Crowe. In Celtic tradition the Crow is a symbol of King Arthur. According to Celtic folklore, Arthur did not die, but was magically transformed into a raven. This connection does not contradict Dr. Crowe's identity as a fisher

⁸ See, for example, the psychoanalytical analysis of *The Sixth Sense* in Rickels.

king figure, since in some versions the ailing king awaiting Perceval's help is King Arthur (as in John Boorman's *Excalibur* [US/UK, 1981], for instance).

The first turning point in *The Sixth Sense* occurs when Cole, assisted by Dr. Crowe, decides to change his attitude toward the ghosts that have frightened him, and tries to talk to one of them. Dr. Crowe reinforces Cole's sense that the ghosts do not want to hurt him, but have come to ask for his help. This is Cole's first step toward accepting a difficult role—that of a kind of “ghosts' psychoanalyst,” who deals with unresolved ghostly matters and helps them to relinquish their grip on life. Cole's first mission as such a medium is on behalf of a child-ghost named Kyra Collins (a name that resonates with therapeutic calling). Instead of flinching as before, he now listens to Kyra and discovers that his hunch was right—she had come to ask for help. Like Perceval, Cole's first reaction to a wondrous vision had been wrong. The required reaction is to ask a question expressing compassion, and Cole finally and intuitively understands this. He asks Kyra: “Do you want to tell me something?”, a question in the spirit of the one Parzival (in a German version of the story, by Wolfram von Eschenbach) asks the fisher king: “What ails thee?”

Asking the right question leads the story in a different direction. What has been so far a horror movie now reformulates in terms of a knightly adventure. Together with the good doctor, Cole sets out to rescue a damsel in distress, Kyra's little sister, whose life is in danger. Both the motif of a damsel helping her sister and the completion of a heroic task by a knight who is true-of-heart are from medieval romance. Eventually, Cole understands, as did Perceval, that he is not supposed to be a passive spectator gazing at a marvelous vision, but to actively participate in the drama, to ask questions and to right wrongs.

Kyra's story ends in a revelation of a horrible and surprising secret. The two sisters' tragedy is reshaped as a version of the Oedipal story (in altered gender): their mother had poisoned both her daughters, posing herself as a Laius figure. Vincent Grey is thus not the only character in the film whose story echoes Oedipal murderousness.⁹

The scene after the successful rescue demonstrates the change in Cole. His new attitude to the ghosts surrounding him—in accord with his new role as a medium who is no longer conditioned by horror film conventions—is reflected in the school play. Cole plays young Arthur in a staged version of *The Sword in*

⁹ According to Carroll, Lévi-Strauss is correct in identifying a series of repeated events which indicate “the undervaluation of blood relations” in his analysis of the Myth of Oedipus. However, the range of such events is broader than his analysis would suggest. Carroll's analysis of the Theban saga, of which the Oedipus story is but a part, also includes the killing of Pentheus by his own mother, Agave (who is Cadmus's daughter), and other deaths of children caused directly or indirectly by their mothers (805-814).

the Stone (T.H. White, 1938). The pulling of the sword out of the stone and the coronation of Arthur parallels Cole's changed status: the haunted victim becomes a savior knight and the transformation is celebrated in a public acknowledgment of Cole/Arthur as a popular kid in class/king of England. Dr. Crowe watches the show, together with the other parents, and according to the shot/reverse-shot pattern established between him and the stage, Cole's initiation process now appears to be complete, thanks to Crowe's guidance and fatherly support. The film repeats a valuable lesson also found in Chrétien's version: a healthy mental development can be achieved only through familial support.¹⁰ *The Sixth Sense* depicts Cole's adjustment to his unique role. Just as Arthur was predestined to be king, and as other knights were predestined to become knights of the holy grail (Perceval, Galahad), so too does Cole fit into his role as a medium. In terms of modern psychology, Cole "is healed" when he accepts his calling.¹¹

The final conversation between Dr. Crowe and Cole takes place in a significant location in terms of the systematic allusions to the grail story. After the school play, Cole, still in a knight's costume and holding a sword in his hand, says goodbye to his doctor while standing against a Gothic-style stained-glass window. Cole, with his new-found self-assurance, is now advising the doctor on how to approach his estranged wife. Cole says he should try talking to his wife while she sleeps, and it is unclear if he is aware of the deeper meaning of his advice (perhaps he somehow unconsciously knows the ways in which the dead can communicate with the living). Cole can now wave his sword and help his ailing doctor. With this advice, the mutual recuperation of the doctor and the patient is complete.

As in Chrétien's grail story, a child-hero learns about compassion. And just like in the ancient story, it turns out that youth or innocence does not hinder the completion of a knightly mission, but in fact allows the deciphering of a riddle inaccessible to the older and the more experienced.¹² As the title of the film suggests, no physical or intellectual power is required, but rather the power of intuition, a sixth sense.

¹⁰ In fact, the only lesson Perceval ever learns in Chrétien's version is about the importance of family. An interesting analysis of this theme can be found in the article by Arden and Lorenz, who trace allusions to the myth of Perceval in the Harry Potter books.

¹¹ In this sense, Cole resembles Harry Potter, a young magician, who like him, has a calling. They both need to adjust to the special powers they have and the great responsibility that comes with them. Like other super-heroes, they both feel lonely, till they find a supportive environment that helps them transform from outcast freaks into heroes.

¹² Foolishness is Percival's main attribute also in *Parsifal* (Wagner) and *The Fisher King* (Gilliam). In some versions it is emphasized that only an innocent fool can cure an ailing king (Umland and Umland 175-185).

The power of intuition is also central to Emma Jung's interpretation of the grail story. According to Jung and Von Franz, the grail story is a metaphor for the individuation process the self goes through (68-78). In this process, Perceval meets anima figures (prominent among them is the grail bearer): as representatives of a feminine principle, these figures are the personification of a psychic and unconscious reality with which Perceval must come to terms. The fact that Perceval forgot about his mother during his adventures expresses his betrayal of the feminine principle. As a result of the betrayal, he failed to solve the grail puzzle (in Chrétien's version). In other versions, Perceval eventually learns his lesson. The compassion expressed in his question: "What ails you?" is identified with the feminine. Both Cole and Dr. Crowe succeed where Perceval failed because of their natural healing tendencies.¹³

The climax of the film comes in the next scene: Once Dr. Crowe realizes that he himself is one of the ghosts haunting Cole, he is 'cured': the doctor "saw only what he wanted to see," and the spectators are no less surprised than him, for they have been confined to his field of vision and level of knowledge. The surprise revelation does not affect the motif of "the doctor who is cured through treating a patient," since the dead doctor had needed help himself in order to let go of life and to heal his troubled soul. His quest, as it turns out, was to rest his soul. Conversing with his wife helps her too to finally end her mourning. Time

¹³ And also because of the bonds they have with the women in their lives. The importance of the mother figure in the grail myth is especially apparent in *The Sixth Sense*. Mending Cole's relationship with his mother, Lynn, is an important part of the happy ending of the film. However, not all grail stories nor all texts relating to it focus on the relationship between Perceval and his mother. For instance, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* centers on the relationship of Dr. Indiana Jones with his father, Dr. Henry Jones. Their personal and professional animosity is resolved in the climax scene, abounding with explicit allusions to the grail story: Indiana succeeds in identifying the Holy Grail set among fake grails, gives it to his father who has been shot by the Nazi archeologist and restores him to life. Mrs. Jones has a minimal appearance in the film—through dialogue we learn that she had been ill and died without telling her husband about her illness. Unlike the grail story, the death of the mother is attached here to her husband's ignorance, and not her son's. A different woman in the film is characterized in Oedipal terms: each of the two Joneses had had an affair with Dr. Elsa Schneider, a German researcher who cooperates with the Nazi regime. Indy expresses discomfort when he hears of his father's romantic involvement with Dr. Schneider. His father is much less troubled by the Oedipal implications of this "coincidence." In any case, there is no identification of the grail with a feminine figure or with a feminine principle in the hero's soul. On the contrary, Dr. Schneider is far from understanding the meaning of the grail and is presented as a failing knight, searching for it for the wrong reasons, much like the rest of the Nazi delegation.

had stopped for both of them, but now they are both ready to move on – in his case, to die.¹⁴

The surprise twist creates a sentimental effect. It seems as though the dead miss the living just like the living miss their dead loved ones. The ending shapes the film as a family drama: a successful initiation process in one family, and in the other, a sad departure. The spectators, much like the protagonists, are misled in regard to the generic identity of the film, but are given a “second chance” to decipher the meaning of the events: together with Cole we comprehend that it is not a horror movie, but in fact a family drama. Together with Dr. Crowe we learn that we have seen a psychological thriller, not a ghost story.

As part of the general surprise structure of the film, the Doctor’s fatal wound is hidden beneath the overcoat he always wears. Delaying the revelation of the facts regarding this injury resembles the delay in the information regarding the fisher king’s illness in the grail story (in Chrétien’s version). The shooting leaves Crowe bleeding from a spot similar to that where Longinus had struck Jesus. The very same bleeding lance from the Crucifixion is a significant item in the grail procession, in several versions of the story.

Eventually, Cole and Crowe heal one another, and also the women they love. The mutuality of their recuperation symbolizes that each of them is both an ailing king and a savior knight. Like the wounded fisher king, they both need help. Like Perceval, they both first make a mistake but are given a chance to amend it—Dr. Crowe revises his diagnosis of Vincent Grey and Cole changes his attitude toward the ghosts haunting him.¹⁵

The surprise also invalidates the false impression of a connection between Vincent Grey and Cole Sear. They are two child patients who suffer from similar symptoms, but who approach their predicament differently, each according to a different mythical pattern. Grey solves his problems through patricide and self-annihilation, Cole, on the other hand, chooses life and finds a way to coexist with the ghosts surrounding him. He even befriends them. Unlike Grey (or Hamlet, another famous Oedipal figure), he does not lose his sanity after encounters with ghosts (of fathers or of others). He also chooses a healthy relationship with Dr. Crowe as a father figure, a substitute for his missing biological father.

¹⁴ The surprise structure of *The Sixth Sense* has a precedent in ancient grail stories. In *Diu Crône*, a 13th century German version, by Heinrich von dem Turlin, the grail knight is Gawain. As in other versions, Gawain’s host is a crippled old man. After Gawain asks him the right question, however, it turns out that he was actually dead and had had to pretend he was alive, until the mission of the wandering knight had been accomplished! (Weston 115-16).

¹⁵ The “mutual healing of Perceval and the Fisher-King” motif appears in other films relating to Medieval Romance, e.g. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *The Fisher King*.

Cole's father is mentioned in a thought-reading game. Dr. Crowe tries to approach his new patient through a game simulating telepathic force (the game acquires an ironic meaning in repeated viewings, when it is clear that the young boy is the one with supernatural powers). One of the doctor's guesses concerns the watch on Cole's wrist. The doctor is correct in guessing it is his father's watch, but fails to guess how he had got it: his father did not hand him the watch before leaving, but had left it in a drawer. The watch is broken, but Cole wears it anyway, in a futile attempt to connect with an estranged father. This guessing game scene forms another allusion, this time a cinematic one. Dr. Crowe's guesses remind intertextually informed viewers of the watch starring in the story of Butch in *Pulp Fiction*. The watches that pass from father to son in both films connect through the actor Bruce Willis, who is the fatherless son in *Pulp Fiction* and the surrogate father in *The Sixth Sense*. Thus, an intertextual chain of orphans and father figures stretches across filmic texts. This intertextual chain also has an ironic aspect, when compared with the intertextual chain of guardians of the grail in the medieval sources: the holy grail is reduced to a broken watch; heroic fathers are replaced by abandoning ones.¹⁶

The broken watch of Cole's father is also linked to the wasteland motif central to the grail story. The wasting of the land here, as in the grail legend, is depicted in climatic terms—it seems that winter will not end till the arrival of the savior knight, Cole Sear. As in certain grail stories, here too we find a symbolic link between the king's illness and the wasteland.¹⁷ In retrospect, a symbolic link is also established between the wintry setting and Dr. Crowe's mental and physical condition: the spectators unknowingly join his "winter sleep," his unawareness to his true state. The long Philadelphia winter expresses his frozen worldview, and of course also has a realistic motivation: it justifies the coat that conveniently hides his fatal wound from him, Cole, and us.

¹⁶ Shyamalan "inherited" the watch from Quentin Tarantino, and they both seem to have related it to a prior film, in which Bruce Willis had to deal with a watch laden with familial significance: *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, US, 1988). In *Die Hard*, it is the watch of his careerist wife. What happens to the watch marks the transitions in the couple's relationship. It is worthwhile noting that the chain of allusions stretching among films starring Bruce Willis is not a unique feature of what is referred to as "post-modern cinema," but is, in fact, also a conventional principle of medieval Romance: characters, relationships, objects, etc. re-appear in sequels, prequels and "remakes" of the grail story and other knightly deeds. The multi-plot structure and the non-chronological organization of the events in *Pulp Fiction* are also prominent in the Romance tradition (Vinaver 68-98).

¹⁷ The causal and symbolic link between the illness of the king and the wasteland is at the center of the study of Weston, who contends that the grail and the bleeding lance do not appear in most versions of the story and therefore are less important to its meaning. The constant and therefore meaningful details are, as mentioned before, the ailing king, the wasteland, and the savior knight (20-24).

The film ends with a clip from the video of the Crowes's wedding. The spring wedding is the only sign of the much-awaited banishment of winter. If, according to Lévi-Strauss, the banishment of winter is a task typical of Oedipal heroes, then our heroes are triumphant, even though they both achieve a Percevalian ending and stand in opposition to those characters who have chosen an Oedipal trajectory (Vincent Grey, Kyra's mother).

Conclusion

Allusions to the stories of Perceval and of Oedipus, and to the structural opposition between them, are not unique to *Pulp Fiction* and *The Sixth Sense*. Allusionistic systems that incorporate both mythic models can, in fact, be found in many films before them, some of which are considered to be milestones in American cinema. For instance, *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, US, 1974) can be read as a text laden with allusions to both myths. As an American tragedy, *Chinatown* positions Jake Gittes in a Percevalian role. Just like in Chrétien's tale, he fails in solving riddles, in saving damsels captured by a cruel tyrant (again two sisters) and cannot redeem a wasteland, in this case drought-stricken Los Angeles. Noah Cross is a Laius figure, who succeeds in his murderous plots against his offspring. Evelyn Mulwray, Kathryn (her daughter-sister), Hollis Mulwray and Gittes are all Oedipal characters forced to pay dearly for his depravity and lust for power.¹⁸

As befits a detective story, the film abounds with riddles and word plays. Some of the word plays are connected to Oedipal and Percevalian motifs. For instance, Noah Cross's surname implies his crossing the boundaries of universal law by violating the incest taboo. In ironic contrast to the righteous Noah, the biblical hero of the story of the Flood, Noah Cross is responsible for the malicious desiccation of San Fernando Valley, hoping to benefit from the drop in the cost of land there. Whereas the biblical Noah took measures in order to save all animals and the natural order of things, Noah Cross shatters the natural order and begets a daughter/grand-daughter from his own daughter. Hollis Mulwray tries to stop him—his righteous role is implied in his name, resonating Holiness. Even in his first appearance in the movie, Hollis proclaims that he is not going to make the same mistake twice—he will not build a dam that is likely to break, as had happened before. Hollis's motivation resembles Perceval's—they both want to put right their mistakes and to save a wasteland. His refusal to cooperate with Noah, however, gets him killed, and this fact aligns him with the fisher king: Noah drowns Hollis, his former partner and a founding

¹⁸ According to Kimball, studies of the myth tend to ignore the sins of Laius and their contribution to the tragedy of his son (1-31).

father of Los Angeles, in a pool, as part of his political schemes – an ironic fate for a fisher figure.

The film is laden with allusions to both myths not only at the level of events and characters, but also at the level of visual and verbal imagery. For instance, animal imagery includes fish of various kinds, which appear as a leitmotif and are linked, of course, to the fisher-king. The sheep herded to the city hall by the protesting farmers remind us of a pastoral culture, like the Greek culture in which the Oedipus story takes place.¹⁹

Another example of well-known films containing allusions to both myths is the first trilogy of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, US, 1977, 1980, 1983). In the climax of the story, Luke Skywalker decides to act against the advice of his mentor, Obi-Wan, and does not kill his own father. Luke's father, much like Laius, had sided with the dark forces and seeks the death of his son. Luke disobeys Obi-Wan because he is convinced that his father can be redeemed. In mythic terms, he avoids getting into an Oedipal clash with him. Instead of killing his father, he tries to talk with him and cure him. Eventually, contrary to Obi-Wan's premonitions, his choice is proven correct: he heals his father (mentally and morally, though not physically), just like Perceval in de Boron's version of the grail story. The choice to react in a Percevalian manner is especially dramatic here, considering the hostility the father has manifested toward his son. The shift in the story, from the Oedipal model to the Percevalian one, is part of a massive system of allusions to medieval romance spread along a trilogy, which is basically about the adventures of space-knights (Mackey-Kallis 202-21).

The films analyzed thus far attest to the fact that the Percevalian myth has constituted a major inspiration for contemporary filmmakers, alongside the more famous myth of Oedipus (thanks to the interpretation of Freud). Unlike the tragic tale of Oedipus and the house of the Labdacids, the grail story offers a healthy resolution to the eternal conflict between fathers and sons, and this is probably the reason why its influence can be felt in many texts of popular culture. Interestingly, the present analysis has shown that many films combine allusions to both myths, in complex and meaningful ways. The two models can function as an alternative to one another, or as a continuation of each other.

Analyzing the complex interrelations among allusions to the two myths may therefore contribute to the field of research regarding father-son relationships, dedicated till now to the myth of Oedipus alone. For instance, Susan Jeffords explains the focus on father and son relationships in American cinema of the 1980s in allegorical terms: in her opinion, it portrays political anxieties concerning a crisis of leadership in the United States. All in all, it seems

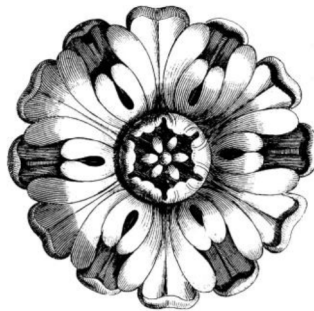
¹⁹On seeing, blindness, riddles and incest in *Chinatown* and the Oedipus myth, see Kimball's article and also Belton, Gamel, and Elsaesser and Buckland 220-49.

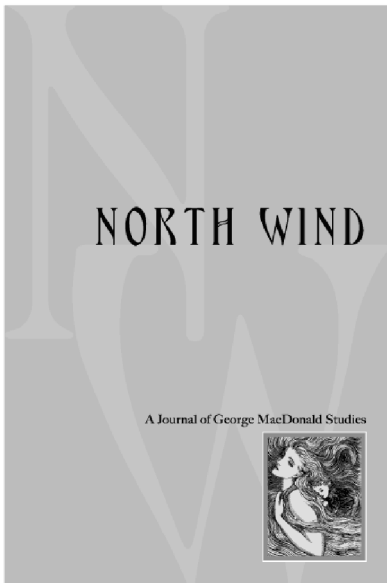
that the two mythical models continue to engage the public discourse and capture the imagination of filmmakers. Combinations and further elaborations of the components of the two ancient myths will most likely appear in still other films to come. It is therefore both important and of interest to study any changes in the dominance of each myth as a narratological and ideological model as well as the intensive borrowings from both in various filmic texts.

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