

Release the Perseus! On Divine and Mythic Violence in *Clash of the Titans*

Clash of the Titans (1981) and its 2010 remake tell the same Perseus and Andromeda story in startlingly different ways. Most significant is the disparity between the films' portrayal of the gods. This paper will draw on Walter Benjamin's classic *Critique of Violence* to argue that, where the 1981 original is best understood as a story of divine violence, the 2010 version can be fruitfully read as an instance of mythic violence, and that this shift in attitudes likely reflects deep-seated changes in contemporary Western society.

In his *Critique*, Benjamin is concerned with the relationship of violence to justice and laws, to means and ends (236). Mythic violence is a subspecies of legal, lawmaking violence which Benjamin defines explicitly in relation to Greek myth. He uses the legend of Niobe as an example: "Niobe's arrogance calls down fate upon her not because her arrogance offends against the law but because it challenges fate – to a fight in which fate must triumph and can bring to light a law only in its triumph" (248). The violence visited upon Niobe is creative insofar as it preserves her "both as an eternally mute bearer of guilt and as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods" (248). Niobe's metamorphosed body institutes official relations of power and property, as well as an entire system of equal laws to preserve the unequal status quo: "where frontiers are decided, the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete" (249).

Perseus in the 2010 version of *Clash* acts precisely in this manner –the petrified Kraken of the film's climax represents the re-establishment of the legal boundary between gods and men violated in an early scene where Argives destroy Zeus' statue. The Olympians are pleased, the wicked (Hades, Cassiopeia) are punished, and a "new" world order is introduced with Perseus as its divinely sanctioned policeman. That this world order causes massive collateral damage and

returns power to the hands of unconscionably selfish actors is irrelevant – in this respect, 2010 Perseus is the scion of Ovid’s violent and nihilistic Perseus from *Metamorphoses* 5.

While the 2010 film’s legal violence is epistemologically unproblematic (it is based on an intelligible moral code and a visible system of divine and state power), it remains ethically problematic as grounded in a law itself instituted through violence and thus demonstrably arbitrary, coercive, and open to objection. One thinks of the violence visited upon the poor of Argos in favor of their monarchs, and of the violence implicit in Zeus’ rise over Hades and the gods’ rise to power over the Titans: “lawmaking is powermaking, assumption of power, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence” (Benjamin 248).

For Benjamin, the only possible escape from the cycle of legal violence is divine violence. Divine violence is defined as

“a pure immediate violence... Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythic violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythic violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythic violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates... Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living” (249-50).

Whereas pure divine violence is not subject to ethical judgment (it is not a means nor does it have an end), it is epistemologically problematic: “less possible... is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases... because the expiatory power of violence is invisible to men” (252). For human beings, epistemological certainty

regarding divine violence is achievable only via a decision, the decision commonly known as faith.

Yet film trumps faith with its unique power of revelation. At the end of *Clash* 1981 the merely mythic gods of Olympus acknowledge their own transience and subordination to a greater heavenly order projected to last until the end of time. This truly divine (in Benjamin's sense) order explains why there is no strongly ethical or even logical causality behind the film's dreamlike progression from one scene to the next. As a fairy tale, the film acknowledges mystery in its structure. Its follies and contradictions only become intelligible in hindsight and from a divine perspective, while its unreasonable expiation remains beyond the grasp of its human agents, who are thereby stripped of agency and intelligence – as brilliantly enacted by Harry Hamlin's Perseus.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter. 1921. "Critique of Violence." Trans. Edmund Jephcott. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings volume 1*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, pp. 236-252. Boston.