

## Hollywood's Villainous Masculinities: A Study of Hades and Set from *Clash of the Titans* and *Gods of Egypt*

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*Gods, Goddesses, Heroes and other mythical figures from religious mythologies have made continued appearances in Hollywood films since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with many of them reflecting the times and era of their production in the guise of depicting the “ancient” world and dealing with “sacred” themes in a secular manner. While a cinematic text invites us to identify with the hero, the antagonist is imbued with qualities that require judgement from the hero. This paper seeks to undertake a character study of the Greek God Hades from *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and the Egyptian God Set from *Gods of Egypt* (2016) to understand the ways in which the cinematic imagination constructs them as antagonists and condemns their ways. While the hero and his masculinity is generally propagated as a form of “ideal” masculinity, the villain forms a more complex characterization as he may embody qualities possessed by the hero himself and yet be termed “unheroic”. Reading the texts as embodiments of popular culture, and thus, as sites for interrogating contemporary socio-political and cultural concerns, the paper would like to explore the construction of villainous and “non-ideal” masculinities in the figures of Hades and Set. Utilizing a textual reading of the films, the analysis would be supported by theories derived from Masculinity Studies and Film Studies.*

**Keywords:** *Hollywood, mythology, masculinities, heroism and villainy*

### Introduction

Clark (2007, p. 9) argues that popular culture sometimes expresses the zeitgeist of an era, “speaking to deep-seated beliefs that are consistent with what we believe are the best qualities of our collective society”, and at the same time also reflects the unconscious and sometimes negative (be it racist, classist or sexist) views that we have internalised and “prefer not to admit to ourselves”. Thus, sites of popular culture such as film, television, novels etc. are in her words locations in which these “contradictions and negotiations are constantly played out through narrative and representation” (Clark 2007, p. 9). Big-budget popular Hollywood films with their ability to advertise, distribute and attract mass audiences at a global level have the potential to influence a large number of people. This paper therefore, aims to study the depiction of heroism and villainy with reference to the cinematic projection of images and conceptions of “ideal” and “non-ideal” masculinities in two popular big-budget Hollywood mythology-based films, namely *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *Gods of Egypt* (2016). The paper specially focuses on the depiction of the cinematic villain as the figure of the villain is hypothesised as cinematically subverting and/or inducing the audience to interrogate Hollywood's

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representation of the hero, the currently accepted ideals of heroism in popular culture, and highlighting hegemonic and dominant forms of “heroic” ideal masculinity in post 9/11 cinema.

After the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001 and the subsequent “War on Terror” led by the United States of America’s President George Bush led administration, a plethora of movies across multiple genres were being produced and released by Hollywood which directly or indirectly engaged with the events, its aftermath and its continued influence on the American and global psyche (McSweeney 2017, Boggs and Pollard 2006), be it films directly dealing with the events and aftermath of the 11 September attacks (*United 93* 2006, *World Trade Center* 2006, etc.), the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (*The Hurt Locker* 2008, *Zero Dark Thirty* 2012, etc.) or allegorical films engaging with the geopolitical events and time of their production and expressing the anxieties of the age (for instance science fiction films like *War of the Worlds* 2005, *Children of Men* 2006, etc.). The rise and popularity of the “superhero” film genre, war/counterterrorism centred films, and metaphorical heroic films propagating an idea of American strength, American defence against outside attacks with many having overt/covert “nationalistic” and “American supremacist” themes (for instance the films mentioned above) could be seen as mechanisms in response to the 9/11 attacks. Dodds (2008a, p. 1625) observes in his article that “Films help to sustain social and geopolitical meanings” and are “capable of reflecting but also challenging certain norms, structures and ideologies associated with US foreign and security policies and the ongoing war on terror” (Dodds 2008a, p. 1625). Released in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the mythological films chosen for study respond to a need for heroic films in a post-9/11 and “War on Terror” world and are argued to be a part of the same environment that birthed the other “nationalistic” Hollywood films, as films are understood to have the ability to function as both a “barometer” (McSweeney 2017, p. 8) and a “catalyst of national discourse” (McSweeney 2017, p. 9). Contextualising the texts within this time-frame and concurrent geopolitical events, the paper asserts that the films must be understood as having overt/covert ideological agenda and being a means to propagate American geopolitical supremacy to both a domestic and international audience.

While scholars like Cyrino (2005) have hailed twenty-first century as the return of the “epic film” (generally understood as mythological or historical fantasy films depicting an “ancient” world) with the release of *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott) in 2000, the propagation of heroic films, and the glorification of symbolic “American” heroes necessitates a study of the temporal circumstances of their production. While an all encompassing exploration of multi-genre films is beyond the scope of this limited study, a concerted focus on mythology-based films with their symbolic good versus evil narratives, glorification of heroic figures and condemnation/vanquishing of villain figures offers a parallel alternative to the ubiquitous and similarly constructed post 9/11 “superhero” and “war films”. Religio-mythological stories, characters, settings and other fantastical elements have long been utilised by Hollywood as base material for its cinematic narratives, thereby creating a grand spectacle for entertainment and attracting

audiences due to its familiar content. Biblical or Christianity related themes and topics were utilised ever since the inception of the mode of cinema by the early practitioners mostly based in Europe while Hollywood with its greater financial and production capabilities soon overshadowed them in terms of the quantity and quality of films. Non-Christian mythology was another rich source of stories for the American film makers and 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the utilisation of primarily Graeco-Roman mythology for making several mythology-based “epic” fantasy films. “Epic” films, both in Hollywood and world cinema were variously set in an “ancient” world derived from mythological, historical or text-based sources while not claiming authenticity for cinematic purposes, and were many times ahistorical and temporally unspecified. Jon Solomon uses the term “ancient” cinema in his book *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (2001) to denote films depicting mythological, Biblical, historical and/or texts/plays based “ancient” world setting. Elliott in his “Introduction” to *The Return of the Epic Film* (2015) notes that following the failure of several big-budget “epic” films like *Cleopatra* (1963) *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), films of this genre were discontinued being made in America post the 1960’s, though TV series and low-budget made to-TV films etc. were being produced, while in rest of the world the “ancient” “epic” film survived in various forms like the Italian Peplum films. Fuelled by the success of “ancient” world set Television shows, there was however a “renaissance” of these “ancient” films in America in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s for a brief period (Solomon 2001, pp. 17–18). The 21<sup>st</sup> century however saw a revival of this genre with various “historical” and religio-mythological “epics” being produced and released in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This renewal in interest could be observed across popular culture with the release of several mythology based novels and video games which substantiate the terming of this wider cultural interest in mythology based texts as a “trend”. The publication of several mythology based popular fiction books and book series and their popularity across demographics increased the wider visibility and renewed interest in the area. Popular fantasy fiction texts like Rick Riordan’s Ancient Graeco-Roman mythology based *Percy Jackson* series and its sequels (2005-2014) which spawned a less popular *Percy Jackson* movie series (2010-2013), ancient Egyptian mythology based *The Kane Chronicles* trilogy (2010-2012), ancient Norse mythology based *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* trilogy (2015-2017); Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2001) which is being produced as a TV show (2017-); James Lovegrove’s *Pantheon* series (2009-2019) which re-imagines figures from multiple mythologies into a modern setting and led to the invention of the term “Godpunk” fiction (a sub-genre of Speculative Fiction where ancient Gods/Goddesses and mythological figures are re-invented in a modern contemporary setting); are just some of the few popular ancient mythology based fantasy fiction texts which have renewed and maintained our interest in ancient mythologies. They thus, formed an environment conducive to enthusiastically producing and receiving films re-imagining ancient mythological divine and heroic figures.

Identifying the release of mythology based films as a “trend” within Hollywood, this study focuses on two mythology based films, one based on ancient

Greek mythology and the other on ancient Egyptian mythology, as a means of understanding popular and contemporary attitudes on masculinities, American nationalist aspirations, fears and anxieties as constructed and propagated in the cultural imagination of the world through Hollywood films. It also highlights current manifestations of American Exceptionalist agenda where in America sees itself as “the savior nation...of the world” (Flesher and Torry 2007, p. 6). The main body of the paper would be divided into three sections, with the first section offering a critical background on areas relevant to the study of mythology based Hollywood films and post 9/11 Hollywood cinema in order to contextualize the study of the primary texts. The second section would focus on the theoretical framework and methodology utilised to study the texts. Theories derived from Film studies, Masculinity studies with a perspective based on critical writings from the field of Popular Geopolitics would be utilised in the reading of the texts. The third section of the paper would be critically analysing the two primary texts followed by the Conclusion.

Reading the texts as embodiments of popular culture, and thus, as sites for interrogating contemporary socio-political and cultural concerns, this paper seeks to undertake a textual character study and explore the construction of villainous and “non-ideal” masculinities in the figures of the Greek God Hades from *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and the Egyptian God Set from *Gods of Egypt* (2016). It aims to understand the ways in which the cinematic imagination constructs them as antagonists and condemns their ways. The paper hypothesises that while the hero and his masculinity is generally propagated as a form of “ideal” masculinity, the villain forms a more complex characterization as he may embody qualities possessed by the hero himself and yet be termed “unheroic”. If the Hero is represented as an “ideal” masculine figure possessing qualities that serve to establish him as a Dominant and Hegemonic form of masculinity, the paper explores the question of what makes a villain. Is the villain “unheroic”? Is the villain presented as a “non-ideal” form of masculinity? Does the villain subvert accepted forms of heroic (hence “ideal”) masculinity? The subsequent sections of the paper attempts to study and answer these questions in the larger backdrop of contemporary geopolitics.

### **Gods, Heroes and America: Contextualizing Post 9/11 Mythology Based Hollywood Films**

Solomon (2001) opines that the ancient world has had such an immense appeal for cinema due to its content which provided an opportunity for grand spectacle, the “ancient” characters depicted were familiar and considered impressive, the fantastical settings of the ancient myths allowed for cinematic escapism, while the ancient world continued to assert a visible and continued influence on modern Western civilization (Solomon 2001, pp. 1–3). However, there were more Biblical/Christian and Graeco-Roman mythology-based films produced in comparison to any other ancient mythologies.

*Hollywood and the “Epic” Film Genre*

Mythology based “ancient” world films were produced as “epic” films in the twentieth century. The term “epic” film presents a host of difficulty in theorising as critics and scholars constantly debate on the terminology and the means to categorise films as “epic”. Generally speaking “spectacular films set in the ancient and medieval past” (Burgoyne 2011, p. 1), are termed as epic films. One of the earliest scholars writing on the epic film is Derek Elley who identifies the 20<sup>th</sup> century epic film as not “spectacular films, inordinately long films, heroic films, war films or costume films” (Elley 1984), which 20<sup>th</sup> century studios and advertisers term as “epics”, but rather films which utilise the “epic form” derived from epics of Classical Greek and Latin antiquity, specifically films showcasing events up to the end of the Dark ages. He says that the film epic has utilised one of the most ancient art-forms and “propelled it into the present day covered in twentieth century ambitions, anxieties, hopes and fantasies. The chief feature of the historical epic film is not imitation but *reinterpretation*” (Elley 1984). Deleuze (1997), while discussing the American epic film and its “historical” components, for instance in the films of D.W. Griffiths (*Intolerance* 1916) and Cecil B. DeMille (*The Ten Commandments* [1923, 1956], *Samson and Delilah* 1949), notes that the genre favours “the analogies or parallels between the one civilization and another: great moments of humanity, however distant they are, are supposed to communicate via the peaks, and form a ‘collection of effects in themselves’ which can be more easily compared and act all the more strongly on the mind of the modern spectator” (Deleuze 1997, p. 149).

Focussing on contemporary epic films, Burgoyne (2011, pp. 1–2) says,

Traditionally framed as an expression of national emergence and national consciousness, and strongly associated with the category of national cinemas, the contemporary epic, with its complex array of nested and overlapping production and distribution arrangements, has become the very exemplar of transnational and global modes of film production and reception.

*The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics, and History in the Twenty-First Century* (2015), edited by Andrew B.R. Elliott focuses on the return of the epic film genre in Hollywood after a generation of absence since the commercial flops of films like *Cleopatra* (1963) etc. with Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000). He along with other essayists discuss this phenomena, and posit that a generation gap refreshed interest in the genre while the use of CGI and special effects cut the massive production costs and therefore facilitated their return. They reiterate that the epic film set in the past is an effective way of critiquing the present. Similarly, Martin Winkler notes that “Retellings of classical stories on film may show that filmmakers have used the ancient material consciously in order to comment on their own times or that they unconsciously reflect cultural trends” (Winkler 2009, p. 3). They act as a kind of “cultural seismograph” (Winkler 2009, p. 8), a concept which B.R. Elliott notes reconciles the idea of “ancient” or “historical” films as a vehicle for studying the present through the past while also not negating the film’s earnest attempts to retell historical events (Elliott 2015).

Another important role played by “epic” films was its use as a vehicle to propagate dominant and hegemonic ideological agenda, emphasising Comolli and Narboni’s (2009) assertion in “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism”, that every film is political because it is the product of an ideological system. Films may therefore aid in maintaining the cultural hegemony of the dominant and the powerful. American “epic” films were likewise used to propagate an America centric and American supremacist world view. Flesher and Torry (2007) observe how Cecil B. DeMille’s blockbuster Biblical epic *The Ten Commandments* (1956) which was based on the Biblical story of Moses and the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, responded to the anti-communist Cold war era by conflating Communist Russia with the Egyptians and tyranny, while the audience was supposed to identify with Moses as an American hero and a “type” of Christ, championing freedom and democratic ideals emblematic of popular American cultural and political values (Flesher and Torry 2007, pp. 71–96). America thus, takes centre stage in the staging and production of these films with the oppressed masses fighting the tyrant and espousing ideals of freedom, equality and justice being conflated with America and American values while the villain/tyrant in the “epic” film becomes a symbolic metaphor for America’s current enemies. This same interpretive method has been adopted to view the current texts for study wherein it is postulated that the mythological heroes and God-heroes represent a “type” of American hero and represents America while the body of the “villain” becomes an interesting battleground of contemporary fears and anxieties projected by America’s mediascape as a danger to America, its values, its security and from a non-American hegemonic view, a challenge to its geopolitical supremacy. This dominant and highly ideological binary division constructed through post 9/11 cinema for a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic domestic and international audience therefore necessitates a critique of popular films to identify strands of conforming or subversive textual codes in relation to this dominant position.

#### *Mythological Heroes and Villains: Archetypes from Myth to Cinema*

The images of the hero and the villain seen in any imaginative art conform to or are variations of archetypal images found in world myths. The theory of archetypes was given by Jung who considered myths to be an expression of a collective unconscious. He says that there “exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes” (Jung 1968, p. 109). Heroes and Villains are a necessary part of every story for fuelling the narrative and providing the necessary identification and emotive markers, while being designed to offer the audience, models of virtue and wickedness for emulation or condemnation. Alsford (2006, p. 2) notes that, “What a culture considers heroic and what it considers villainous says a lot about that culture’s underlying attitudes – attitudes that many of us may be unaware that we have, and which represent cultural currents that we may be equally unaware of being caught up in”. The concept of the hero has been embedded in the myths, legends and stories of every culture.

LoCicero (2007) notes that “The mythic hero is also an amalgamation of a number of archetypal images, and as such is a part of our species’ psychic inheritance, a universal constant that transcends culture and time”. Western mythology has long been revolving around “the figure of an individual, usually male and often of godlike proportions, who is on a quest of some kind” (Byrne 2000, p. 3). In regards to most heroes in these early myths being male, Byrne (2000, p. 3) suggests that instead of viewing this immediately as a patriarchal conspiracy, one should understand that an exploration of the masculinity of the traditional hero will be able to provide insights about European and Western cultures and especially their “mythologizing of masculinity”.

Campbell’s (2004) concept of the monomyth and his observations on the journey of the archetypal hero across myths in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a useful narrative schematic to approach the heroic quests depicted in contemporary films, and indeed the similarity of the heroic quest structure displays the enduring influence of ancient mythic patterns and the universality of the archetypal hero in “his” manifold –culturally, geographically and temporally varied– manifestations. He claims that there is a similarity in the fundamental structure of myths across the world, and that the journey of the archetypal hero goes through three basic phases of “*separation—initiation—return*”, which forms a “monomyth”. He observes that in a typical heroic quest myth, the hero goes on a journey wherein he is separated from his everyday common world and encounters the “supernatural”, he has to fight “fabulous forces” and then triumphs over them. The hero finally returns back from his adventure with the “power to bestow boons” to his people (Campbell 2004, p. 28). A hero can be anyone who displays qualities that are considered admirable by society, and need not be only associated with myths of masculinity-glorifying warfare, battle prowess and physical strength. The heroic figure is an intrinsic part of the cultural heritage of any culture and community, and they maybe a mythical supernatural figure, a legendary figure or a real historical figure. But the common thread that binds them is that they have always accomplished exemplary feats, or have possessed noble qualities and done noble admirable deeds. The hero figure there is in some sense aspirational, inspirational, and due to their rootedness in a particular cultural set-up, ideological. As Alford (2006, pp. 39–40) observes,

The hero confronts the otherness of the world and seeks to overcome it, often via a willingness to set aside their unique powers thus rendering themselves vulnerable. By contrast, the villain revels in the power to control, to manipulate and ultimately to create a world in their own image.... The villain coerces, imposes and seeks to destroy anything that it cannot bend to its will. The hero takes the more dangerous path, the one that always runs the risk of self-destruction as a consequence of self-sacrifice and abandonment to the world.

The ultimate moral framework that defines a person or an action as heroic or unheroic is according to Alford defined by the utilisation of power. He says that “each one of us can be said to possess power by virtue of our very existence, it is what we do with it, or choose not to do with it, that renders us either heroic or villainous”. Significantly, it must also be understood that as Christopher Vogler

notes, from the villain's point of view, he "is the hero of his own myth, and the audience's hero is his villain" (Vogler 2007). In the cinematic text, the hero and the villain is sometimes clearly defined for the audience, however ambiguity and complexity in characterisation makes the depiction more powerful and nuanced, rising above caricatured two-dimensional hero/villain-good/evil dichotomies, and renders them more "real". The villain figure is required in the narrative to perform several functions, either to initiate the hero's journey, provide a character for the hero's required triumph for narrative satisfaction, and within Jungian studies, symbolises the dark energies of the self that needs to be vanquished for the triumph of the self (hero as the self). It can sometimes be a seductive figure, blurring the boundaries of socio-cultural morality and propriety, and serve as a study of human psyche in relation to the desire and consequence of unchecked power. Within the field of popular geopolitics, the figure of the "villain" however can be studied as representative of the dominant ideological formation of the "other", be it racial, ideological, religious or geographical "other", reflective of the state of contemporary geopolitics and concurrent national fears and anxieties. While concomitantly, the hero becomes a representative of the nation's collective consciousness and a receptacle of the nation's cultural imaginations with regards to national security, a symbol of its strength, hopes and aspirations.

#### *Post 9/11 Cinema and the "Villains" of America*

Scholars in the last few decades have increasingly focused on the use of mass media including films, television, radio, video games, YouTube content etc. for propagation of certain ideological agendas which benefit the United States of America and attempt to overtly/covertly garner support for their political and military actions. Lissovoy et al. (2016) talk about the ideological use of popular screen based cultural artefacts which are aimed at youth consumption like the first-person role playing game *Call of Duty* (2003) [video game]; *World War Z* (2013), *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014), and *The Hunger Games* series (2012-2015) [film]; and the YouTube channel of Swedish gaming-vlogger PewDiePie (online interactive media). According to them these artefacts are strategically brought into the arena of global politics in the age of "war on terror", in order to influence young people into identifying with the rhetoric of this conflict, including the aggressive policies and actions employed by the US government and providing ideological support with regards to their role in ongoing global conflicts. Dodds (2008b, p. 227) discusses the role of Hollywood films in "making and circulating images of terrorism" and directs his attention at the "military-industrial-media-entertainment complex" (Dodds 2008b, p. 232), and its production and dissemination of content (especially Hollywood films directly dealing with political and military matters with US involvement) which are state-centric and positive of the military (many times because of the support provided by the State and the Military in the production of these "war films"). Post 9/11 and the "War on Terror", the "terrorist" in Hollywood films and other media was increasingly imagined as a homogenized Islamic/Middle-Eastern "other" (Nayak 2006, Khalid 2011, Lissovoy et al. 2016). Boggs and Pollard (2006) discusses the construction



and representation of the “terrorist” (the villain figure) in Hollywood films wherein the villain/villains change based on contemporary geopolitical concerns and have variously been depicted as Nazis, Orientals, Serbs, generic Communists while in current climates they are overwhelmingly Arabs and Muslims who need to “be identified, fought, and destroyed, usually by (white) male heroes armed with maximum force” (Boggs and Pollard 2006, p. 346). These studies focusing on contemporary multi-media content analyses the depiction of the figure of the “terrorist” who is identified as a danger to the “West”, to USA and also to the world, and the ways in which the threat is mitigated, variously normalizing war, images of violence and torture, and military conflict initiated by USA. The “terrorist” figure as the villain is embedded with meanings designed to serve the dominant hegemonic ideological formations propagated by the American state while texts critical of this construction also focus on the villain figure to provide alternative narratives to the one dominant in American visual culture.

Post 9/11 fantasy cinema as allegorical texts, have greater freedom to engage with the socio-political and cultural milieu of the times and are able to provide multiple ways of representing the anxieties, the fears and pre-occupations of the people in the shadow of 9/11 and the “War on Terror”. As McSweeney (2017, p. 6) notes:

Given the cultural resonance of the ‘War on Terror’, it comes as no surprise that many allegorical films were able to bear witness to this fractious period, mirroring the events of the decade in the form of alien invasions, zombie outbreaks, superhero films, disaster films or even ‘torture porn’, each projecting their narratives through the prism of 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’.

With the purported “return of the epic film” in the twenty-first century and the traditional connection of the “epic” film with national imaginary and national consciousness, mythological “epic” films too maybe seen as allegorical fantasy texts based on mythological sources produced in the same environment as superhero films, zombie films, disaster films etc. and justifies the current paper’s interest in viewing the primary texts as ideological products responding in various ways to the pre-occupations of the era.

The post 9/11 resurgence of the superhero film and its unprecedented box-office success has made the first decade of the twenty-first century known, according to Gray II and Kaklamanidou (2011, p. 1) as the “superhero decade”. They note that the superhero film was a highly successful and lucrative means to fulfil the need for heroic figures during times of great upheaval post 9/11 (Gray II and Kaklamanidou 2011, p. 3). Significantly, the resurgence of the superhero film with its elements of renewed patriotism and nationalism evident in the plot and characterization of the film, specifically in the figures of the superhero and the villainous “other”, also invokes the parallel return of the mythology based “epic” film in the twenty-first century with its “superheroic” heroes and authoritarian/dictatorial villains (reminiscent of the dictators/authoritarian regimes of the US designated “Axis of Evil” countries namely Iraq, Iran and North Korea). This need for heroes and concurrently “evil” villain figures to be vanquished as popular culture’s attempts to negotiate contemporary geo-political events, and the fears,

desires and anxieties of a nation is an important strand of thought pervading the study.

### **Analytical Framework: Popular Geopolitics and Films**

Geopolitics, geopolitical power and geopolitical imagination are some of the terms prevalent in both academic and non-academic (for instance news media) circles and have been extensively used in this paper. As Dittmer and Dodds (2008, p. 441) note, geopolitics can be seen as “a discourse and a practice engaging in the creation of geographical relationships and orders so that global space becomes divided into simplistic categories such as good/evil, threatening/safe and civilised/barbaric” with popular geopolitics referring to “various manifestations [of political and geographical world ordering] to be found within the visual media, news magazines, radio, novels and the Internet”. Dittmer (2005), deriving from the work of G. O’Tuathail, S. Dalby, and J. Sharp succinctly summarises popular geopolitics as “the construction of scripts that mold common perceptions of political events” (Dittmer 2005, p. 626). Dodds (2008a, p. 1622) discussing the field of popular geopolitics, as “a sub-set of critical geopolitics” focusing on popular culture, looks at “how film might be used to consider not only the representational politics of depicting spaces, power and identities but also to investigate their creation, articulation, negotiation and contestation” (Dodds (2008a, p. 1623). Utilising insights from popular geopolitics, Dittmer (2013, pp. 2–3) studies the nationalist superhero sub-genre and seeks to

...reposition the role of superheroes within popular understandings of geopolitics and international relations from being understood as a “reflection” of preexisting and seemingly innate American values to being recognized as a discourse *through which* the world becomes understandable. In this view, the pop-cultural dimensions of politics (e.g., superheroes) are neither the result of political meta-beliefs (such as American exceptionalism) nor the condensation of economic ideology. Rather, superheroes are *co-constitutive* elements of both American identity and the U.S. government’s foreign policy practices.

The above illustration of the application of insights from popular geopolitics onto superhero films reveals how popular culture artefacts are not only reflections and representations of various contemporary nationalist, geopolitical and socio-cultural concerns but also “co-constitutive” elements for the production of identity and in various ways legitimating/contesting/reworking state policies. This understanding underscores one of the primary research questions of the paper as the study attempts to explore the ways in which contemporary mythology based “epic” films can be read in a post 9/11 and “War on Terror” world either as a means of propagating and legitimating an idea of American supremacy or contesting/subverting the same and providing alternate models of conduct. Theoretically drawing on the critical worldview derived from popular geopolitics, an analytical framework is received to study the primary texts.

### **Theorizing Masculinities: Constructing Masculine Images for Consumption**

Connell (1987), divides masculinities into four types based on their positions in relation to one another. They are hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalized. The relations among the four positions are hierarchical with hegemonic masculinity occupying the dominant position. It has also been noted by Connell that men occupying hegemonic masculine positions are statistically low in number but they are definitely the norm. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p. 832) embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men". They claim that "at a society-wide level...there is a circulation of models of admired masculine conduct, which may be exalted by churches, narrated by mass media, or celebrated by the state. Such models refer to, but also in various ways distort, the everyday realities of social practice" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 838). This conception is significant because it establishes the position of films, as mass media, in disseminating dominant forms of masculinity and also influencing everyday social practices. Jeffords (1994) says that Hollywood films played a major role in providing images of ideal masculinities for the audience and specifically discussing the Reagan era, states that the masculine characters in the most popular films of the time provided narratives against which American men and women could "test, revise, affirm, or negate images of their own conception of masculinity" (Kindle).

It has been noted by Connell (2000, p. 84) that "To say that a particular form of masculinity is hegemonic means that it is culturally exalted and that its exaltation stabilizes the gender order as a whole. To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes". Complicit masculinity is understood as a form of masculinity which is complicit with the hegemonic project without having to necessarily enact it and overall benefits from the patriarchal dividend. Subordinate masculinities in contemporary European/American society may refer to gay men whose homosexuality is easily assimilated to femininity. Heterosexual men who blur this line too may be considered in a subordinate position. The interplay of gender with other structures like class and race may bring other masculinities, termed marginalized masculinities which can be used to categorize non-White or disabled masculinities (Connell 2005, pp. 78–81). She emphasises that these terms are "not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships" (Connell 2005, p. 81).

Shamir and Travis (2002, p. 1) note that "we tend to cling hard to some of the most well-entrenched truisms about masculinity: that it connotes total control of emotions, that it mandates emotional inexpressivity, that it entraps in emotional isolation, that boys, in short, don't cry". Heroic male characters generally subscribe to traditional stereotypes of dominant masculinity with their emphasis on physical strength, battle prowess, sexual virility and display of courage and bravery, while display of emotions and vulnerability is traditionally considered a sign of weakness. In this continued effort to construct ideal masculinity, men's lack of a language to articulate emotion and constant show of strength and

invulnerability become significant points of enquiry in order to reveal whether the male heroic characters depicted in the films subvert or conform to traditional masculine stereotypes. Seidler (2006) emphatically notes that, “When we think about power and difference, we are not only thinking about relationships between men and women; we also have to think about different sexualities and the complex relationships that separate diverse masculinities. We cannot forget about issues of class, culture, ‘race’ and ethnicities and how these set up relationships of power and entitlement between different masculinities” (Seidler 2006, p. xiii). This paper following Seidler seeks to engage in an inclusive non-reductionist and intersectional study of masculinities in the primary texts to understand contemporary and popular notions of ideal and non-ideal men and masculinities, and cultural imaginations of contemporary American manhood.

### **Methodology**

This study attempts a textual reading of the films selected for study while contextualising them within the significant socio-political and cultural events of the era. The analysis targets the specific genre conventions of the “epic” film and its’ contemporary transnational evolution, the symbolic and ideological codes embedded in the text and the representations of masculinities within a heroic-ideal/villainous-non-ideal characterisation spectrum.

### **Case Study**

The selected films deviate from the original myths in several ways; however, this study would eschew an attempt to assess the level of authenticity of the cinematic texts. The study understands that the cinematic characters were derived from the original Ancient Greek and Egyptian mythological figures and re-invented for contemporary audiences. This re-invention hence, becomes a domain of particular interest as it can shed light on prevalent notions of ideal and non-ideal masculinities and the ideological construction of the villain figure.

#### *Hades: Revengeful Usurper or Zeus’ Victim?*

The film begins with a voice-over narrating the war between the Titans and their offspring the Olympian Gods, and the eventual victory of the Gods. The “earthly” realms are divided between the Gods with Zeus becoming the “King of the Heavens”, Poseidon “King of the Seas” and Hades “tricked by Zeus, was left to rule the underworld in darkness and in misery”. Hades being tricked into residing and ruling the underworld is identified as the source of his rebellion against the status quo and desiring more power than Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian Gods. The tale begins with Spyros, a fisherman finding a casket adrift in the sea, which when opened, revealed the film’s hero Perseus as a baby along with his dead mother’s body. He adopts the baby and raises him with his wife Marmara.

He is the one who sets up the first ideological and ethical tussle between tyranny and benevolent justice by uttering in despair after a series of divine mandated community-level and personal misfortunes that, “One day somebody’s gonna have to make a stand. One day somebody’s gonna have to say “Enough”. He hopes for the arrival of a hero who will fight against the tyranny of the Gods who give human beings a hard life, disease, “scraps” in his words, as unjustified punishment (specifically hitting the poor and the weak the hardest) for defiance of divine authority by powerful others (generally the powerful earthly rulers). He rails against the Gods’ continued desire that humans “love” them which the narrative exposition reveals to be the source of the power of the Gods. Justice, benevolent governance and equitable distribution of resources are set up as desirable qualities for the ruler (here divine rulers) against abuse of power and disproportionate use of coercive force on the largely innocent populace. The hero is therefore established as the saviour and his actions against a tyrannical ruler as a necessary moral imperative. His victory over the designated villain and the oppressive system will ideally lead to the establishment of a society better than before. The hero brings forth justice and fights for the oppressed and his actions are considered as justified. This justification for the use of violence and the vanquishing of the villain or the villain’s henchmen/monster as a fight against tyrannical practices is a similar trope seen in contemporary Hollywood comic book superhero films. As the American superhero fights to save America and the world, Perseus too can be seen as a “type” of American hero produced from the mythology re-inventing factories of Hollywood. The ideological and moral justification for his fight is created by the cinematic construction of tyrannical practices, oppressive systems, unjust authoritarian figures, power hungry villainous figures, collectively leading to the persecution of the innocent. This depiction of the tyrannical environment and the fight of the hero of justice and freedom--- Perseus, symbolically resonates with the political rhetoric created by the American government and the American mediascape around the American soldier fighting to defend America and world against the international forces of terrorism/tyranny within the highly propagandized “War on Terror” or “Global War on Terror” narrative. Perseus at the beginning of the film is a simple fisherman’s boy but according to his adopted father Spyros, because the Gods chose to save him for a reason from certain death, he will one day be going on a great journey. This foreshadows his eventual heroic quest and establishes his greater destiny within the games of Gods and mortals than a simple fisherman’s boy. Perseus begins his quest when there is a great upheaval in his normal life with his family’s demise as collateral damage of divine punishment (meted out by Hades to the soldiers of Argos for destroying the statue of Zeus), and hence, following the Campbellian pattern, he goes on a heroic journey, vanquishes the villain and returns as a powerful individual. He is pictured as strong, brave, with impressive physical musculature. However he is not completely emotionally stoic or lacking in a language to express emotions, as he expresses affection for his father and has a healthy bond with him. He breaks into cries of anguish at the death of his loved ones, subverting the trope of the “boys don’t cry”. However his emotional vulnerability is not dwelled on for long and displayed only for dramatic fulfilment frequently sandwiched between important

plot expositions or action sequences. It also continues the trend in action films where the larger than life hero is only allowed to express vulnerability and “feminine” emotions at times of extreme grief.

The villain figure however is kept nebulous at the beginning with the “Gods” as a broad tyrannical and hence, villainous force. Without sympathy and compassion for the mortals who in the cosmological universe of the film are the source of the Gods’ strength and immortality through their belief, worship and veneration of divinity, the Gods seem a powerful tyrannical force. But the levels of villainy differ as the film proceeds.

An analysis of the text reveals actions harmful towards innocents being perpetrated by both Zeus and Hades. Zeus is shown to have impregnated Danae by impersonating her husband King Acrisius, as punishment for his defiance of the Gods and his assault on Mount Olympus, the seat of their power. He also turns Acrisius into a monstrous being known as Calibos who eventually aids Hades’ efforts to impede Perseus’ journey. He further directs Hades to punish those who defy the gods, in this instance the Kingdom of Argos, due to which many innocent people are injured and killed. He does not have to face any consequences for his own immoral and cruel actions due to his position of power as the Chief of the Gods. Hades while punishing the mortals under Zeus’ orders has another agenda of his own, as he seeks to undermine Zeus and replace him as revenge for Zeus tricking him to rule the Underworld and being confined there. His method is to eliminate mortals as Zeus and the other Gods derive their power from the mortals’ worship while Hades does not need their veneration anymore as his power is fuelled by the fear of mortals. He threatens to unleash the Kraken on the Kingdom of Argos, unless Princess Andromeda, the daughter of King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia of Argos is sacrificed, revealing his cruel and apathetic side. Hades is eventually forced back to the Underworld and his plans are foiled by the hero Perseus, but nevertheless as a god, he escapes divine justice for his crimes. The narrative establishes Hades as the major villain, as he challenges the status-quo of Zeus’ rule over the mortals, threatens large scale destruction of human lives by unleashing the monstrous deep-sea giant squid like creature, the Kraken. He is needlessly cruel, abuses his power, has no compassion or kindness for living creatures and is merely focussed on his revenge, by destroying Zeus and assuming the power for himself.

Hades seeks to attain power through two means- one is through fear and intimidation and the second military coercion with the goal being to destabilize the world order where Gods are worshipped and thereby gain power. When he threatens the destruction of Argos unless Princess Andromeda is sacrificed, thereby, fomenting anarchy, fear and rebellion in the state through the doomsday prophet and the leader of the Cult of Hades-Prokopion, his aim is to break the bond between the mortals and the Gods so that the mortals do not love or worship the Gods anymore. He uses tactics of military coercion when he unleashes the Kraken and his own massive divine powers against the mortals to break their resistance and create instead feelings of fear for Hades, which in turn increases his power. His manipulation of Calibos, Prokopion, and Zeus reveals his cunning while also being a testament to his intelligence and brilliance in military style

strategic manoeuvres utilising both overt displays of his might as well as covert means of destabilizing the order to gain power. Even though he is pictured as a middle aged man, he is in his prime and the actor playing Hades, the English actor Ralph Fiennes ably manages to harness Hades' lean, power-hungry demeanour, cruel angry eyes and his hulking stance. As he is a divine figure, he does not need to have sword fights or display his body musculature, instead using his supernatural powers to fight. He is shown as a man with a thick black beard and a receding hairline with wild voluminous hair, clad in dark, shadowy robes while the other Gods wear shining white and golden armour and clothes. A darker lighting and shadow effects are used when he appears on the screen to contrast him with the supposedly benevolent God Zeus, whose beard and hair are trimmed, while bright lighting is used during his appearances. The visual depiction of a divine patriarch in most religious inspired art is that of a bearded long haired aged man, be it Zeus, Odin, the Norse God or Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian God. This visual suggestion of Hades as a similar powerful divine patriarch but twisted and villainous is achieved through the manipulation of the popular iconography of the divine patriarch figure. His power is established in this way. His might, cunning and his deified status present a character that could be a hero and an ideal form of aged but powerful masculinity. His motives to overturn Zeus' rule also seem justified as Zeus had wronged him by dishonestly making him the King of the Underworld, in essence condemning him to rule and reside in a terrible place. He also was following Zeus' orders when he was punishing the mortals, thereby making his actions legal even though cruel. It was Zeus who gave him permission to "turn them on each other" so that the mortals return to the "arms" of the Gods. In this way he subverts the idea of a one-dimensional male villain figure, who is almost a caricature of twisted masculinity. His character challenges the idea of Zeus as the "good" God, as Zeus constantly abuses his power, be it the horrific act of raping Danae or ordering the use of undue force on mortals as punishment for their defiance, all in an effort to maintain his own power and rule. Zeus' moral ambiguity in the text makes him a softer villainous figure, whose goal of maintaining power is proposed in the narrative as justified while Hades is presented as the unjustified cruel usurper with his reliance on fear as divine fuel. Hades' cruelty and use of undue force and his apathetic manipulation of mortals however makes him irredeemably villainous. His authoritarian style, use of undue force on innocents, thirst for power, reliance on fear, and motivations of revenge however make him a twisted cinematic fantasy of a real-life dictatorial figure or even a terrorist figure like Osama bin Laden. American propaganda has relentlessly over the years peddled the idea of a dominant America being infinitely more preferable to other nations or regimes even though there might be several problematic actions executed over the years by the American state, be it manipulation of weaker states, proxy-wars, regime-changes etc. These other nation-states, organisations, communities or figures could be whoever the American media, the American State, and/or mediums of popular culture like films, TV shows, comic books etc. designate as the villains of the world. Zeus then with his pre-occupation with maintaining the power status-quo and focussing on the mortal's continued "love" and veneration for the Gods easily fits into the popular

perception of America itself, both in the eyes of non-Americans and the constructed image marketed by the American propaganda machinery. He says that the mortals' "insolence has a price" and "like children they need to be reminded of the order of things". This evokes the persistence in popular culture of texts glorifying America and the silencing of their detractors as a way of maintaining their geopolitical supremacy. Perseus and his heroic quest to save mortals from a dictatorial cruel villainous figure like Hades, is then established as a hero, and therefore an ideal form of masculinity. However it is unclear how Perseus challenged the tyrannical rule of the Gods as he was actively fighting to defeat Hades and the Kraken, and not the rule of the Gods. It is left unresolved if the Gods and their rule changed for the better at the end of the film. Hence, foregrounding him as the hero of justice who will finally say "Enough" to the Gods, remains hollow. Zeus and his morally ambiguous characterisation is left unresolved at the end, as the audience only sees him as not being angry at mortals anymore and offering immortality to Perseus, his son. His abuse of his filial duties by asking Perseus to go on a dangerous quest, offering immortality only when Perseus is successful in saving Zeus' rule, having no qualms in punishing mortals for questioning the Gods even if he does not want their complete annihilation or oppression like Hades, does not make him a "good" heroic character and therefore not an ideal form of masculinity. It can therefore be suggested that both Hades and Zeus complicate the idea of good and evil, of hero and villain and of "ideal" and "non-ideal" masculinities despite their status as powerful Gods. Indeed their amoral/immoral actions prove them as non-heroic and therefore falling into the spectrum of "non-ideal" masculinities.

*Set: Usurper, Saviour, Harbinger of Change*

Set in *Gods of Egypt* ushers in change in the ancient God-ruled kingdom of Egypt and is a catalyst to pave the way for a more compassionate and egalitarian set of deity-rulers. Prior to his rebellion against Osiris, the Egyptian Gods and especially the protagonist Horus is depicted as indolent, hedonistic, selfish, apathetic to his mortal subjects and secure in his privilege as the next heir to the throne. The tale follows the growth of Horus when his previous power and privilege is challenged and decimated by Set's rebellion and murder of Osiris, whereupon he seeks the help of a mortal thief named Bek to regain his lost power.

The film begins with the narrator, an older Bek providing the background of the Egyptian Gods and their place in Egyptian society as both divine figures and earthly rulers. Egypt is understood as the birthplace of all civilization, and a paradise worthy enough for the Gods to reside along with their "lesser creation"-man. The Egyptian Gods looked like humans but were taller with gold running in their veins, more powerful with superhuman abilities, and possessing the ability to transform into "all manner of terrifying beasts". Egypt was divided between two brothers by their father Ra, the God of Light who ferried the sun across the sky and kept the demon of Chaos, Apophis at bay. The narrator says that among the two "mighty" brothers, Osiris, the God of Life was "the beloved King of all the lands made bountiful by the Nile", while his brother Set, ruled the far barren desert



finding both strength and *bitterness* in his isolation” (Emphasis Added). Set challenges Osiris during the planned coronation of his heir, his son Horus, the God of Air. This stems from Set’s unhappiness at being relegated to the barren desert while he believes Osiris got the better end of the deal in his far more comfortable existence. Set is moreover denied children by his father Ra. It is later revealed that it was a test set by Ra for Osiris and Set, Osiris to rule but not cling on to his power, while the isolated and harsh desert would have hardened and toughened Set for his eventual destiny of fighting Apophis in the place of Ra. Ra believed not granting him children was a kindness as Ra in his solitary fight constantly missed his own children. Set however refuses the path set by his father and gropes for earthly power by defeating Osiris, Horus and other Gods and becoming the King while also attempting to gain immortality by destroying the Afterlife itself. He is dissatisfied by what is given to him and constantly aims for more. In his ambition and greed he seeks immortality instead of mere long life, to be the supreme God and King of all Egypt and not simply the God of the desert, to be the most powerful God by incorporating into himself the powers of the Gods he defeated and murdered. He does not hesitate to kill his brother Osiris for the throne, stops killing his nephew Horus only because Hathor, the lover of Horus and the Goddess of Love, begs for his life, murders his wife Nephtys for rebelling against his usurpation and does not hesitate to kill any God who does not bow to him. His tyrannical rule begins by his overturning of Osiris’ proclamation that all mortals would be welcome to eternal life in the Afterlife, and instead demands payment in riches and treasure from the dead souls for entry. This system is designed to cow the masses into submission as the mortal populace is harnessed into penniless slavery to build grand monuments, and can therefore never rebel as they would then never have any wealth to pay for entry into the Afterlife. He grabs the throne of Egypt through the use of force, bringing in his army to quell any rebellion, sneakily knifing Osiris after Osiris refuses his demand of a hand-to-hand fight for the throne. He threatens the other Gods that they could either bow before him or die while the mortals must either worship him or be enslaved. He believes that Osiris had accomplished nothing in his thousand years of peaceful rule, merely “a land of people who dream of nothing more”, and hence claims that it is his turn to rule now. He does not even hesitate to kill his non-divine loyal followers for their failure in capturing a far more powerful entity, a major God like Horus. The giant obelisk touching the sky that he commissioned to be built as a tribute to his father Ra was a giant phallic symbol of his megalomaniac self, desiring his father’s attention and validation of his strength and power. He is ultimately defeated by Horus in the final battle after Horus goes through his own heroic journey of growth and self-realisation and recovers his lost powers. It is only after his defeat that he begs for mercy which Horus denies, recognising Set’s treacherous nature. Set’s pre-destined path set by his father Ra and his justified anger and bitterness begs the question that had he been given a better lot in life or at least an explanation for his travails by Ra, he could have been a heroic character and not the villain of the narrative.

Visually, Set whose character is played by Gerard Butler, is a worthy foe for Horus as he is similarly well muscled, has a tall strong physique, possesses

impressive battle skills where he single-handedly manages to defeat Horus in one-on-one combat and subdues every other rebellious God in battle. He is extremely cunning and intelligent, is witty and humorous, with a strong libido and sexual vigour despite his impotency, is an astute tactician and military leader and for most of the film narrative, superior in power to the hero/protagonist Horus. Even though he is Osiris' brother and Horus's uncle, he looks more of a contemporary of Horus in terms of looks. Osiris is shown as older and physically weaker than Set. While Set wears muscle baring leather outfits showing his muscled hands and legs, Osiris wears garments which are longer, covering his weaker body. Set and Horus mirror each other instead both in terms of their battle outfits, physical looks, deep masculine voices, fearless attitude and combat skills. Set could have been the hero of the film if he had not engaged in tyrannical and villainous activities as Horus at the beginning of the film was more concerned with pleasure and revelry, in displays of machismo and hedonism, for instance celebrating his success in a hunt the day before his coronation by indulging in wine and women the whole night. He is hence not responsible and had become indolent in a time of peace. He also considered mortals beneath him and did not consider their lives and desires important. Hence, he did not have any moral qualms in deceiving Bek by promising to bring back his dead lover Zaya in exchange for his help in retrieving his other eye which was taken away by Set. Compared to the earlier version of Horus, Set proved that he was a better fighter and tactician and hence blurs the line between the hero and the villain. His actions however cast him as villainous. The megalomaniac tyrant, authoritarian and undemocratic in his rule, subjugating his political opponents and his citizens, permitting unlawful and unjustified use of force and threatening physical violence and enslavement to anyone who dissents---sets him up as a parallel of the tyrannical dictator figure seen in popular culture. The framework of this figure which abounds in Hollywood films appeals to the national consciousness of America wherein freedom and democratic ideals are celebrated in the public sphere and in popular culture. The hyper-masculine God-hero representing America, who fights this villainous hyper-masculine dictator, is symbolic of a strong masculine America fighting the forces of tyranny and evil. This symbolic imagery is especially relevant in times when America as a nation was involved in several "anti-terror" international campaigns in the Middle East and had been peddling the spectre of the "Islamic Terrorist" to legitimate its controversial military actions in the global arena. Designed to be watched by audiences both domestic and international, it constantly foregrounded America as the "good guys" and "global saviours" in the war against authoritarianism and tyranny.

## **Conclusion**

Hades and Set from the primary texts served as ideal deity-villain figures for study as they both exhibited similar power hungry, megalomaniac, treacherous and cruel behaviours along with superior cunning and supernatural powers. Their actions stemmed from a deep dissatisfaction with the power, station and status

accorded to them fomenting thoughts of rebellion against the established seat of power. A desire to change their current status, overturn the self-perceived injustice perpetrated on them and an ambition to gain more power gave them the impetus to embark on their respective journeys. Framed along the mould of a powerful heroic figure, these villainous masculinities challenged the conception of “ideal” and “non-ideal” masculinities as they possess qualities generally attributed to the “ideal” hyper-masculine male hero. The themes of these films serve similar interests of establishing and emphasising the triumph of the symbolic “American” hero championing ideals of freedom and the rights of the common masses against the powerful deity-villain. These deity-villains are constructed as an amalgamation of various “enemies” of USA as projected in the public sphere, who are perceived as challenging/harming the land, geopolitical power and global economic/political/military interests of the nation. The return of these mythology based epic films hence serve to propagate a “hyperreal” image of America rooted in American Exceptionalist ideologies where in America is seen as the “saviour” nation in the world, thereby culturally validating and “normalising” their geopolitical supremacy and use of military power in the international arena.

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