

DISPLACING THE SACRED: THOUGHTS ON THE SECULARISING INFLUENCE OF HOLLYWOOD

*Ted Turnau**

The essay explores the claim that Hollywood movie makers secularise their source material, suppressing religious themes by examining in detail the changes made in *Road to Perdition* from its original form as a graphic novel to a Hollywood movie. After noting the tremendous impact of popular culture on how we make and receive meaning, we explore how popular culture functions as a type of religious discourse, a functional religion. "Secular" then means not so much a suppression of religion as a displacement of religion into different forms. In *Road to Perdition's* translation from comic to film, we can see a simultaneous eclipsing of traditional religious forms (theological discussion, the role of the Catholic church) and an emphasis on other "sacreds" (non-violence, the father-son relationship) through changes in story, as well as the use of cinematic techniques to create holy moments. The essay concludes with theological reflection on this process of displacing the sacred. It is not unique to contemporary Hollywood, but is rather a particular instance of how humanity reacts to God's general revelation by suppressing it and shifting their sacred commitments to other, created forms (a.k.a. idolatry). To understand popular culture well, we need to be sensitive to these secular sacreds when they appear.

It has become a truism in certain sectors of the evangelical world that Hollywood is godless and has a pernicious, secularising influence on society. I remember as a child my own father complaining somewhat bitterly about how Hollywood had purged or watered down the explicit religious themes of the musical *The Sound of Music* in its transition from a Broadway show to film. A similar pattern can be seen in how Hollywood adapts source material. The book *101 Dalmatians* contained religious references, including an important scene in which the puppies sought refuge from the cold and Cruella de Vil in a church decorated with a Christmas crèche. The book closes with the smallest puppy fondly remembering that night, so we can assume that it had some thematic importance to the author. In Disney's hands, all such religious references were expunged. Similarly, when translated from page to screen, the centre of gravity in C. S. Lewis' classic fantasy tale, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, shifted perceptibly from being centred on

* Ted Turnau is a lecturer in cultural and religious studies at Anglo-American University and Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. He also teaches on popular culture and Christian worldview at Wales Evangelical School of Theology. He has written a book on popular culture and apologetics called *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective*. He is happily married to Carolyn and has three children: Roger (22), Claire (18), and Ruth (14). He also has a cat named Enkidu (7).

the saving arrival of Aslan (the not-so-subtle Christ figure in the tale) to being centred on the personal heroism of the Pevensie children (particularly Peter as a man-of-action). Hollywood has a knack for sanitising its sources by removing religion. There are exceptions, of course. Hollywood occasionally “gets religion” when religion proves itself on payday, as when the studios became temporarily enthralled with the box office returns of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*. But for the most part, Hollywood seems uncomfortable with religion and reshapes pre-existing material into something more secular.

This essay seeks to complicate that picture somewhat, particularly by questioning the assumptions that we hold concerning the “secular”. It is my contention that popular culture (in this case, Hollywood films) wield an influence that does not so much erase religion as displace religion. That is to say, Hollywood takes traditional sacred symbols and repackages them into implicitly sacred forms. To explain what I mean, I shall examine a case study in some detail: the transition of the graphic novel *Road to Perdition* into a Hollywood film.¹

1. Popular Culture as a Social Force

Popular culture, far from simply being trivial entertainment, is an important force in contemporary society. It has always been, and the wise have perennially recognised that fact. Whenever Socrates would travel to a certain city, he always sought out the poets first (recitation or dramatic portrayals of poetry, especially epic and tragic poetry, was popular culture for the ancient Greeks). He wanted to debate with them, because it was through them that the popular imagination was shaped and trained.² In Acts 17 we see the apostle Paul doing something similar, debating in the Athens marketplace of ideas, drawing especially upon Greek poets and assumptions – that is, he engaged their popular culture. He engaged with the shaping force of the Athenian imagination.

During the late eighteenth century, the poet, artist, and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe found out the hard way what an impact popular works can have on the popular imagination. His 1774 work, *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, tells the story of a sensitive, artistic, young, lovesick man through his letters to a friend. Unable to pursue the woman of his dreams (she’s engaged to another), he becomes more and more depressed, and finally commits suicide. The novelette first inspired a fashion craze, as young

¹ The graphic novel was written by Max Allen Collins, with artwork by Richard Piers Rayner for DC Comics (New York/London: Pocket Books, 2002 [1998]). The film version was scripted by David Self and directed by Sam Mendes for 20th Century Fox in 2002.

² Paul A. Cantor, “The Art in the Popular”, *Wilson Quarterly* 25 (Summer 2001): 26-39.

men copied Werther's dress: open-collared poet shirt, blue vest, yellow trousers. But even more alarmingly, it also inspired hundreds of copycat suicides, the most famous being an episode where a young woman leapt to her death from the spire of a church clutching a copy of the book in her hand. In all, about two thousand lovelorn youths killed themselves. The anger that was stirred against Goethe became so intense, that he publically announced that he wished that he had never written the novel. Sociologists still call this phenomenon of people copying popular cultural suicides (such as Kurt Cobain's) "the Werther Effect".³

So historically, popular culture has had, at times, immense social effects. But perhaps that influence has grown in the past 70 years as Western societies have become ever more media saturated. Sociologist David Lyon talks about how postmodern people tend to use media texts (songs, television, movies, web content) as frameworks of meaning, ways to negotiate meaning in their lives, ways to understand themselves and their worlds.⁴ It might not be an overstatement to say that popular culture has emerged in the last seventy years as one of the most (or perhaps *the* most) important centres for the creation and distribution of meanings in society. Popular culture may *seem* light and insignificant, but it is not; it has a profound social impact on a whole spectrum of issues. Think of the gay marriage debate in the US and UK before and after *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Milk* (2008). In the 1970s, a grassroots movement to protect nature drew inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, and that inspiration was renewed by the movies made from the novels. But it is not just "issue-oriented" popular cultural works that change things. Our understanding of romance has been influenced by films like *Titanic*, (1997). Our understanding of religion and spirituality has been influenced profoundly by *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), which introduced the concept of "the Force", popularizing an essentially Eastern religious concept in the West. And even our understanding of evil has been shaped by horror films like *Halloween* (1978) and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Popular culture in general, and Hollywood in particular, has had a deep and lasting impact on how we in the West understand reality. That is to say, it has had a roughly *religious* impact.

II. Popular Culture and Religion: The Secularised Sacred

I realise that last statement might be a bone of contention for some, but I make it advisedly. It depends, of course, on how one defines "religion".

³ See John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 9-10.

⁴ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Wiley, 2000), especially chapter 5.

Defining religion has long been a complex and conflicted affair for scholars of religion, and there have been various schools of thought that each try to define religion according to their own respective interests.⁵ Some seek to define religion through locating its “essence”, an essential ingredient or marker or religiosity. The common candidates are usually orientation to the supernatural, or certain ritual behaviours or distinctive institutions. The problem with this definitional strategy is that not all recognised religions contain the essential distinctive beliefs, behaviours or institutions. So other scholars have tried to define religion by how it functions, how it meets human needs for social unity, emotional comfort, intellectual meaning and so forth.

Such a “functional” approach produces a much wider definition of religion, and this sometimes does not sit so well with some academics who have a vested interest in being (or appearing to be) “rational” and “objective”.⁶ In a secular academic climate so often markedly biased against religion (labelling the religious as irrational, emotionally dependent, intellectually childish, etc.), many academics are quite averse to any definition that might include them. And yet, such a definition does seem to capture something deeply true about the human thirst for meaning, to being placed in a context of something that is, finally, worth living for. *That*, it seems to me, is what constitutes the religious foundation of human existence, rather than some narrowly-defined set of ritual behaviours or belief in the supernatural. For the purposes of this essay, allow me to offer a short definition of religion from this broader tradition: *Religion is a passionate and imaginative investment into a system of belief and practice that makes certain assumptions about the world, identity, about what leads to human flourishing, and how practical moral reasoning should be accomplished.*⁷ At the centre of each of these belief systems is what may be called “the sacred”, that which is most precious and most deeply true.

If you consider that popular culture is effective precisely in guiding our passions and imaginations (and thus, our sense of the sacred) through its stories and images, then it becomes obvious that popular culture as such

⁵ For a fuller version exploration of the idea of popular culture as religion, see Theodore A. Turnau, III, “Popular Cultural ‘Worlds’ as Alternative Religions,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 323-45. See also Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, “Introduction: Finding Religion in American Popular Culture” in *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

⁶ For instance, see fandom scholar Henry Jenkins’ allergic reaction to the possibility that popular cultural fandom might be classified as a type of religion in “Excerpts from ‘Matt Hills Interviews Henry Jenkins,’” in Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 16 ff.

⁷ I did not include “intellectual investment” in this definition not because I believe it is unimportant. Rather, recent studies affirm that our deepest beliefs are passionate and imagination *before* they become formalised in the intellect. See for example James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), especially chapter 1, “*Homo Liturgicus: The Human Person as Lover*”.

resonates within the realm of religion. And it resonates in religious tones even while remaining putatively “secular”.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the classical theories of secularisation stand in need of revision. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the reigning assumption among sociologists was that religion was slowly but surely dying out worldwide. But then the 1980s came, and brought with it an immense and obvious resurgence of public religiosity (the rise of the Religious Right in the US, militant Islam in the Middle East, etc.). But even if the 1980s had never happened, popular culture alone would have (or *should* have) caused problems for the standard secularisation theory. The influence of popular culture strongly suggests that the sacred is not being erased from society, even if traditional religious institutions are in decline. The sacred is not being erased, but is rather being displaced, reconfigured into other forms more agreeable with the “secular” attitude of the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.⁸

Let us consider a particular case study that explores this pattern: *Road to Perdition* in its transition from a quite explicitly religious graphic novel to an implicitly religious film.

III. Road to Perdition in Translation

In its broad outline, the story of *Road to Perdition* remains largely unchanged between its incarnations as graphic novel and film.⁹ Michael O’Sullivan (shortened to “Sullivan” in the movie) works as an enforcer for an Irish crime family run by John Looney¹⁰ (changed to “Rooney” for the film) in the Mid-Western US during the prohibition era. O’Sullivan’s eldest son, also named Michael, longs to know what his father does for a living. He stows away in his father’s car and witnesses his father and Looney’s son, Connor, kill several men.

When Connor finds out that there has been a witness he is furious, but O’Sullivan vouches for the boy’s loyalty and silence. Later, Connor decides that O’Sullivan’s word is not good enough and he kills O’Sullivan’s wife and younger son (mistaking him for young Michael). O’Sullivan vows revenge, but John Looney sends Connor into the protection of the Capone family in

⁸ There have been sociologists who have long recognised this. Among the more prominent would be German sociologist Thomas Luckmann’s *The Invisible Religion* (London: MacMillan, 1967), French sociologist Jacques Ellul’s *The New Demons*, translated by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), and “implicit religion” associated with Edward I. Bailey and the “Network for the Study of Implicit Religion” (see www.implicitreligion.org).

⁹ Spoiler alert! If you have not yet read the graphic novel or seen the film, this would be a good time to do so. Both are works of high quality, sustain multiple readings/viewings, and worth owning, in my opinion.

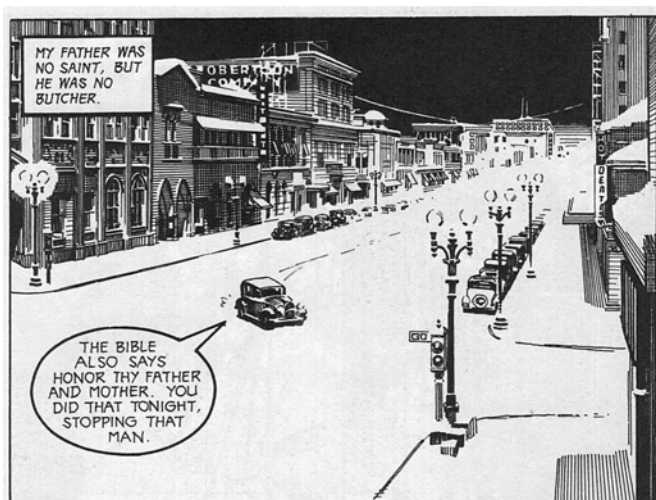
¹⁰ The mob boss Looney was an actual historical figure, a collaborator with the better-known Al Capone crime family.

Chicago, making him unreachable. In response, O'Sullivan and his son take to the road, robbing banks of the "dirty money" they hold for the Capone family.

Their goal is to make hiding Connor more expensive than giving him up. Eventually, Capone decides to give up Connor Looney, and O'Sullivan executes him. He and his son then drive to Perdition, Kansas, where O'Sullivan has relatives and where he believes they can live safely. A mob hit man awaits them, however, and O'Sullivan is killed, but Michael lives to tell the tale. That much the graphic novel and film have in common. It is a very effective hybrid combining elements of the classic road trip, gangster-adventure, revenge and coming-of-age story.

But the elements and places where the two versions of this story diverge are telling.

1. A Shift Away from Christian Theology



First, it is remarkable how much explicit theological discussion the graphic novel contains: discussions about the morality of killing and murder, heaven and hell, grace and forgiveness. For example, after young Michael kills a man who was about to shoot his father, he is overcome with guilt. This prompts a heart-to-heart discussion between father and son about sin and the possibility of forgiveness (see fig. 1). This element of the story is completely absent from the film. In

[Figure 1: Max Allan Collins, *Road to Perdition*, art by Richard Piers Rayner (New York and London: DC Comics/Pocket Books, 2002), p. 190. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. Note Rayner's use of light in darkness especially in the bottom right panel to provide atmosphere for this conversation about spiritual light and dark.]

fact, in the film, there is little discussion between father and son about anything beyond their own relationship and their strategy for forcing Capone to give up Connor Rooney. There is certainly no discussion about the morality of what they are doing, or about sin or forgiveness.¹¹ God doesn't merit a mention in the Hollywood version.

2. *The Church Invisible*

Further, much of the graphic novel is set inside Catholic churches. After his ordeal of having killed a man, father and son drive around until they find a Catholic church in which young Michael can pray for forgiveness.

Even more striking, his father, after each killing, finds a Catholic church to light a candle for each victim and to confess his sins to a priest (see fig. 2). The church is a place of refuge and comfort. In stark contrast, the Catholic church as an institution has been largely erased in the film version. Except for Sullivan's warning to his son to avoid the Catholic church (because of ties to the Rooney family),¹² there is no mention of the church. In fact,

[Figure 2: Collins and Rayner, 161. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. Notice how much attention Rayner gives to the religious iconography in the bottom panel (so much so that O'Sullivan must duck his head so we can see the crucified Christ).]



¹¹ The crime boss John Rooney does mention the impossibility of heaven for men who murder, like himself and Michael Sullivan. I will discuss this scene below.

¹² Michael O'Sullivan gives an identical warning in the graphic novel on pp. 83-84. But throughout, the graphic novel has much more to say about the Catholic church than the film.

there are no scenes that are set in a Catholic church with one exception: when Sullivan makes contact with Rooney while Rooney is at prayer to demand that he give up his son, Connor. The ensuing discussion happens in the basement of the church, its unused underbelly, among discarded furniture and statues of saints (see fig. 3). The atmosphere is one of darkness and disuse (perhaps this is visual commentary on the church itself?).

[Figure 3: *Road to Perdition*, directed by Sam Mendes, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.]



But even more telling is cinematographer Conrad Hall's brilliant use of lighting (we shall have much more to say about Hall in a moment). In the discussion between Sullivan and Rooney, even though both are standing adjacent to bare light bulbs, Hall casts both characters' faces in shadow (see fig. 4). The discussion circulates around themes of betrayal and murder. Sullivan presses his demand that Rooney surrender Connor.



[Figure 4: *Road to Perdition*. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.]

“He murdered Annie and Peter!”

Rooney retorts (and Paul Newman’s delivery is bristling with anger and pathos), “There are only murderers in this room. Michael, open your eyes! This is the life we chose, the life we lead. And there is only one guarantee: none of us will see heaven”.

To which, Sullivan replies, “Michael could”. Because, presumably, he is as yet innocent of the bloodshed that these men have known for decades.

Rooney’s assertion of the certainty of hell for both men is the only time when the dialogue contains a specifically theological element. And Rooney’s (and the film’s?) theology states: there is no grace for such men as us. When all is said and done, they can expect only death and hell. Given the dialogue, Hall’s lighting choice to put both men’s faces in shadow makes sense. This is more than dramatic lighting. It is cinematographic commentary on the dialogue telling us that these men are creatures destined for darkness, that they are indeed doomed. This is the *only* scene in the movie that takes place in the church, as opposed to several significant scenes in the graphic novel. In the novel, the church offers consolation, grace and forgiveness, even to those who feel doomed and beyond redemption. In the film, the church stands as a silent witness to those who have placed themselves *past* redemption. In this way, the film strips away and waters down the graphic novel’s theological content (its emphasis on Christian grace), replacing it with a more simplified theology where good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. The film’s God is distant, and he does not intervene to save sinners. Heaven is to open only to those who deserve it by keeping themselves from violence.

3. *Unstained by Violence*

Which leads to the next difference between graphic novel and film: the violence done (or not done) by young Michael. In the film, young Michael helps his father by driving the getaway car, but he never actually does anything remotely violent. When faced with the sadistic hit man who has just shot his father, he is sorely tempted to kill him, and he *almost* pulls the trigger. But he is saved at the last second from having to do it by his dying father, who shoots his attacker in the back as he tries to coax the gun away from young Michael. Michael stammers, “I couldn’t do it”, as he comforts (and seeks comfort from) his dying father. Young Michael remains blessedly innocent of bloodshed.

In the graphic novel, it is another story entirely. Young Michael kills not once but twice. On two separate occasions, he shoots and kills men who are attacking his father. The first time saves his father’s life, and leads to the discussion about sin, hell and forgiveness between father and son. The second occurs after his father has already been fatally wounded.

His father's last wish is to be taken to a church for confession and for a priest to perform last rites so that he might be absolved of his sins (see fig. 5). As for young Michael, who has been narrating our tale in the graphic novel, the last pages reveal that he has grown up to become a priest, perhaps as a way

of trying to find his own peace with God. In the film version, the orphaned young Michael finds refuge with a friendly farming couple. In the graphic novel, the orphaned young man finds refuge in the church.

So far, the differences between graphic novel and film have been stated in terms of negation: the film "strips away" or "waters down" the graphic novel's theological specificity and commitment to the church. But I want to go further and say that the film offers an alternative "theology" by displacing the graphic novel's sacred into new forms, new sites for religious (that is, passionate and imaginative) investment. The centre of the graphic novel's sense of the sacred lies with

traditional religion, with the rites and theology of the Catholic church. The sense of family is sacred as well, and

the bond that forms between father and son also receives quite a bit of attention in the graphic novel. In the film version, however, that father-son bond becomes all-important. That, plus a commitment to non-violence, becomes the film's new centre of the sacred. This new sacredness can be seen in the film's treatment of Michael Sullivan, Sr., his relationship with his son, his relationship with John Rooney, and finally the visuals that surround Sullivan's death at the end of the film.



[Figure 5: Collins and Rayner, 299. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. The dramatically lit angel in the bottom panel indicates the final destination of O'Sullivan's soul, the arches of the church suggesting the gateway to heaven.]

4. *The New Sacred: He's No Angel (of Death)*

In the graphic novel, Michael O'Sullivan, a WWI veteran, is feared and respected as the "Angel of Death". He is very, very good at killing people. And throughout the novel, he kills his enemies a lot, in very violent ways (taking a razor to his ex-colleagues, for example). And while he doesn't enjoy the brutality exactly, he's certainly not averse to it either. He even kills more than he needs to, if he thinks it will make his point (see fig. 6).

In the film version, Michael Sullivan is respected as an enforcer for the Rooney family, but he is no Angel of Death. That title, ubiquitous in the graphic novel, is *never* mentioned in the film. Instead, Tom Hanks' performance brings out an honest, down-to-earth, quality in Sullivan. Indeed, that is why directors cast Tom Hanks in their movies, because he is so skilled at playing the decent, ordinary every-man. The film's Sullivan is resourceful, quick, and kills when he must, but he is *much* less brutal than he is in the graphic novel.

5. *The New Sacred: The Father-Son Bond*

In the graphic novel, there is warmth between father and son from the beginning. But that warmth is disrupted by young Michael's shock and disappointment at how his father earns a living. He hides in his father's car so that he can see his father at work and be proud of him, as a boy should be. Instead, he witnesses a murder, and is horrified. The rest of



[Figure 6: Collins and Rayner, 151. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. The graphic novel's O'Sullivan is clearly used to blood and brutality in a way that the film's Sullivan is not.]

the novel has to do with young Michael overcoming this estrangement from his father by recognising their shared grief over lost family members, and working together towards the goal of revenge and then, hopefully, a peaceful life. In the midst of violence, the son learns to respect, understand and even love his father, even as the violence leaves its staining mark on him.

The father-son arc in the movie is more prominent. It begins with the *father* as distant and emotionally uninvolved with his children. As in the graphic novel, the two are thrown together by events and come to have a closer relationship. But the movie adds a crucial sequence that is missing in the novel. After being winged by a shot from a mob-hired hit man, Sullivan swoons from loss of blood. Young Michael drives to a farm and pleads for the older couple's help. They find refuge there, but the wound becomes infected and Sullivan becomes feverish. The farmer removes the bullet from Sullivan's arm while a concerned young Michael looks on. Afterwards, Michael patiently and tenderly nurses his father back to health. Putting Michael in the role of caregiver and protector, and the respite from the road and action, gives the two a chance to reconnect and discover the treasure they have in one another. In one beautifully lit scene (seriously, Conrad Hall is a genius with lighting and composition), young Michael, unable to sleep, has a late night conversation with his father (see fig. 7). Michael asks why his father liked his younger brother more than him.



[Figure 7: *Road to Perdition* (2002). © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. Note the warmth of the lighting and colour scheme cinematographer Conrad Hall employs here: earthy, homey, embracing.]

Sullivan explains that Peter was “such a sweet boy”, whereas young Michael was more like him, and he didn't want him to be. The father apologises for treating Michael differently, and before Michael returns to bed, he hugs his father. The physical contact catches Sullivan by surprise, and

he awkwardly returns the hug. But the connection has been made, and the expectation is placed in the viewer's mind that the affection between them will grow. The intimacy, pacing of the dialogue, the earthy-warm tones that pervade the scene all signal that here real life is found, that this is a sacred moment.

6. *The New Sacred: From Raving Looney to Surrogate Father*

To underscore the sacredness of the father and son theme, the film version adds another father-and-son subplot that is completely absent from the graphic novel: Rooney as a caring father who must choose between his corrupt and irresponsible biological son, and his decent and loyal "adopted" son. In the graphic novel, there is no question where Looney's loyalty lies. He wants O'Sullivan dead so that he and his son can get on with life (fig. 8). To get Looney out of the way, O'Sullivan sells him out to the feds (led by Elliot Ness), so that Looney can rot in jail and know that Connor died a violent death.¹³ In the graphic novel, there is no love lost between O'Sullivan and Looney. They are bitter enemies intent on the other's destruction.

The film, however, is a different matter. Early in the film, it is implied that Rooney may have taken in Sullivan as a child and acted as a sort of foster father. Sullivan admires and loves the old man, and Rooney regards Sullivan "like a



[Figure 8: Collins and Rayner, 213. © 1998, 2002, Max Allan Collins & DC Comics. Rayner's artwork makes Looney's attitude toward O'Sullivan alarmingly clear. Such rage at Sullivan in the film would be unthinkable for John Rooney.]

son", as he tells Sullivan in the church basement. The film adds a note of tragic conflict in John Rooney, portrayed with elegant gravitas by Paul Newman. He loves Sullivan, but cannot betray Connor, his own flesh and

¹³ Collins and Rayner, 199-200.

blood. So Sullivan is forced to kill Rooney. After Sullivan has dispatched Rooney's bodyguards, the two eye each other, and Rooney says, "I'm glad it's you". And Sullivan, eyes filled with pain and regret, pulls the trigger. Even in death, the father-son bond between them remains intact. By adding this note of pathos, the film version underscores the sanctity of the relationship between fathers and sons. It is something worth dying for, and killing for.

7. *The Secular Pieta*

But the capstone of the new sense of the sacred in the film comes from the visuals surrounding Sullivan's death scene. In the graphic novel, O'Sullivan is killed and dies in a confessional, having unburdened his soul before God. The priest tells young Michael that "your father is with God now".¹⁴ The death scene in the film is very different, and the visuals are haunted by a sense of the sacred. At the end of their journey, father and son make it to Sullivan's



[Figure 9: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. The layering of the shot – Sullivan, the reflection of the lake and beach (you can see young Michael waving in the reflection on the left side of the window) – as well as the quietness of the soundtrack, gives the scene a serene, slightly surreal feel.]

sister's beach house. Sullivan walks in to find the house unoccupied, and in a pure, white room, he stares out of the picture window at a lake that seems to go on forever (fig. 9). The serene music fades to be replaced by the sound of waves lapping at the shore. The feeling is one of overwhelming peace and resolution. But this is brutally interrupted by two gunshots, and sprays of bright red blood on the window. Sullivan stumbles to reveal his assailant, the sadistic newspaper crime photographer, Harlen Maguire (fig. 10).

¹⁴ Collins and Rayner, 300.



[Figure 10: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. With the gunshots, a new, colorful and shattering visual element is introduced, further complicating the complex layering (reflection, figure behind the window) by adding the plane of the window itself, visible now because of the blood. Sullivan's assailant, the sadistic Harlen Maguire, is visible just over Sullivan's right shoulder.]

Young Michael hears the shots, enters the house and confronts Maguire with Maguire's own gun, but he cannot pull the trigger. His father kills Maguire by shooting him in the back. His son cradles his father's head, a posture reminiscent of the Pieta, as his father dies, murmuring, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry", to his son (fig. 11). Unlike the graphic novel, he seeks absolution from no one but his son. The son, kneeling by his father, doubles over in grief, but there is a sense that posture is one also of sacred devotion, of the



[Figure 11: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks.]

son bowing down at his father's body as a worshipper. Even the movement of the camera adds to the sense of sanctity, as it slowly backs away from this sacred scene, not wishing to intrude further (fig. 12). During this whole scene, there is no soundtrack. There is nothing but the actors' voices and the hypnotic sound of the waves, occupying a pure white room accented by the bright red of the smeared blood of the father. It is a breathtaking sequence. Visually and aurally, it alerts us to the fact that we have reached



[Figure 12: *Road to Perdition*, 2002. © 2002, Twentieth Century Fox and Dreamworks. The composition here is stunning: whiteness, symbolising purity, infinity, eternity, unbroken except by the darkness of the dead bodies, the tripod, the dash of red on the wall, and the grieving son. It is a heartbreaking, but also manifestly sacred, moment in the film.]

the emotional and spiritual core of the film: when the bond between father and son is broken by violence, violence that the son will never partake in. As he tells us soon after in a voiceover, that was the last time he touched a gun. The moment he suffered terrible loss also cemented his commitment to non-violence. He escaped, not unscathed, but unstained.

IV. Displacing the Sacred

It is inevitable that there are going to be changes when source material is adapted for screen. What I find so fascinating is *how* and *what kind* of changes are made. In this instance, a good case can be made that the filmmakers decided to elide the traditional sacred (Catholic theology, practice and institutions) in favour of a new set of sacred symbols: the relationship between father and son, and non-violence. The film uses alternate plot lines, visual and audio clues to show us a new sacred, new sites for passionate and imaginative (that is, religious) investment. These are the aspects of existence that, from the perspective of the movie, give to human

life its ultimate depth, meaning and purpose. In other words, if my argument is correct, the sacred doesn't disappear simply because explicit religious references disappear. Rather, the sacred is displaced into secular forms.

There are those who say that Hollywood and other popular cultural producers have a secularising, anti-religious agenda. There may be some validity to that. Hollywood can be very uninviting to traditional religions, including Christianity. But it would be a mistake to try to ferret out some liberal conspiracy here. Rather, the force that *really* steers Hollywood is not religion or politics, but money. Hollywood studios are businesses, and they make what they think will sell, and avoid that which might hurt sales. And although the U.S. sees itself as a bastion of traditional religion, recent scholarship has revealed that it is fairly shallow religiosity. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's recent sociological study reveals that many American teens (a key demographic for Hollywood) are actually very uncomfortable with particularising religious discourse, preferring what they call "moralistic therapeutic deism".¹⁵ The perspective of the film version of *Road to Perdition* resonates well with the type of least-common-denominator religion represented by moralistic therapeutic deism. There is no need for theologically specific doctrines such as grace for sinners. There is no need for God's intervention to save. The good find their way to heaven. The evil do not. That is to say, the Hollywood handling of *Road to Perdition* resonates well with an important sector of the American movie-going population that is increasingly allergic to theological precision and finds vague moralistic religion more palatable. Hollywood has its own allergies, and its greatest allergy is to anything that might hurt box office sales. Such things give studio execs a horrible rash. If traditional religion runs the risk of alienating potential viewers, it has ways of shifting that sacred content into different, less potentially offensive forms.

Road to Perdition is one very clear example, but you can see a similar pattern in other films. Hollywood does have a secularising influence, even if not intentionally, by marginalising traditional religious themes or silencing them altogether. But this does not mean that the films thereby become less religious. The explicitly religious is simply recast in other forms that are more implicit, hidden, deemed to be safer for a wider, more general audience. Popular culture in secular societies doesn't really erase religion. It displaces it. Religion is alive and well in the West, concealed in secular popular culture.

¹⁵ See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).