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***The Debt* – film - analysis**

Mythology vs History

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I call this presentation: "Mythology vs History." There are 4 parts.

Part One -- Some Background

The Debt premiered at TIFF [Toronto International Film Festival] in 2010 and then released in 2011. The director is John Madden. He directed *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, also released in 2011. Before that, *Shakespeare in Love* in 1998. *The Debt* is loosely based on a 2007 Israeli film.

The Debt is really two stories in one: one set in 1965; the other in 1997. So, there's a 30 year gap between the events in question. The narrative focuses on three Israeli agents -- Rachel, David and Stefan. They are all young -- in their 20's -- and eager to make their mark. The three of them are on a mission to capture a notorious Nazi war criminal, Dr. Dieter Vogel. He was reputed to be "the surgeon of Birkenau," infamous for his medical experiments on Jews during World War II. Their mission was straightforward: capture him and bring him to Israel to face justice.

I like this film for the questions it raises, not the least of which are: Why do the young actors/actresses morph into older individuals who look nothing like them? More on that later. Rachel is played first by Jessica Chastain, then by Helen Mirren. Jessica Chastain by the way stars in *Molly's Game* this year. David is played first by Sam Worthington and then by Ciaran Hinds. Stefan by Marton Csokas and then Tom Wilkinson.

The plot weaves back and forth between events and also between people who don't look the same in the two different eras. So, admittedly, it is not always easy to follow who's who -- or what is happening when. Roger Ebert criticized the film's editing.

Besides the issue how the actors/actresses change so dramatically in appearance as they age, the film raises the problem concerning the accuracy of our understanding of history. Can we now know what reliably happened in the past? Often, we can't, perhaps because the evidence is scant. And sometimes we can't because the narratives about what actually happened are contradictory.

In this case, however, we do know what happened. We are let in on the secret behind their mission in the 60's. We learn that the three heroes agree to lie about their mission. It's a

deception, a cover-up, a convenient fiction that had huge ramifications. Thus we have the juxtaposition mythology and history, what is said to have happened superimposed on what did happen. Furthermore, we are witnesses to the deception...and to its unravelling. That's the issue I'll focus on in this paper: deliberate deception. What is it like to live constantly with a lie and the threat of exposure?

Part Two: Let's start with The Truth: What Really Happened

The film opens with the three Mossad agents being welcomed back, to Israel. The film quickly cuts to a different scene, some 30 years later. We find ourselves at a book launch in 1997. Rachel's daughter has written a laudatory account of her parents' daring mission. It's a moment of intense personal and national pride.

We begin to sense, however, that it is a difficult moment for both parents – Rachel and Stefan – as they exchange furtive glances with each other. We don't yet know why but we suspect something is amiss. As we come to realize, they both know they are frauds and they seem worried that their 30-year old lie is about to be enshrined forever in print. Will the narrative of their daring exploits hold up? Will they be exposed? And, if so, what shame would their daughter face? How could they live with themselves for living a lie? Will the truth come back to haunt not only them but their family members as well?

Then the film flashes back some decades earlier and now we begin to get a sense of what actually happened. So, let's go back.

The year is 1965. Rachel, David and Stefan are all 30 years younger. Rachel is eager to make the mission a success. David is melancholy, introspective and withdrawn. Stefan is much more outgoing. Their mission is to capture Vogel and bring him to Israel to stand trial. In the midst of the Cold war, that presents complications -- how to get Vogel out of East Berlin in the Soviet sector into West Berlin and from there into Israel. Rachel and David pose as a married German-speaking couple from Argentina. She is seeking fertility treatments from Vogel in order to get close to him.

Two issues are introduced as the plan is being hatched. First Stefan informs Rachel that David had lost his entire family during the Holocaust and so this forms part of his motivation to pursue Vogel. That helps set the mission in context: it is a debt to be repaid to the victims of Vogel's atrocities. The mission serves a higher purpose than mere revenge: it has to do with justice.

Secondly, we learn that both Stefan and David are attracted to Rachel. While Rachel is attracted to David, she sleeps with Stefan after David rebuffs her advances. This results in her becoming pregnant.

Back to the mission and here things move quickly. Vogel's identity is confirmed. Rachel, seeking fertility treatment, is on the examining table in an extremely vulnerable position. She surprises

Vogel, injecting him with a sedative. The extraction plan is set in motion. Quickly the plan unravels, however, and the action moves rapidly from an ambulance, to an unused subway station that goes through East Berlin, to an apartment. Then there are complications as Vogel comes out of sedation and raises a commotion.

Vogel, now captive, ends up with the three agents in their apartment. While a new plan is being hatched, he manages to free himself. He attacks Rachel, leaving her with a permanent long facial scar. Numb from the attack, Rachel manages to shoot at the fleeing Vogel and sees him fall to the ground.

Success? Well, no. When they try to get rid of his body, they find out that he has managed to escape.

Hence what actually happened does not jibe with what was said to have happened. Event, and narrative about the event do not sync. History is covered over with a convenient mythology. The book launch is a fraud. And Rachel and Stefan know it. Now their daughter is part of the lie, part of the cover-up. The lie has passed to the next generation.

Part Three: Let's turn now to the Deception itself: What They Said Happened

So, they failed. As they see it, it's a massive failure. They have failed not just the mission. They have also failed their families, their country, and, above all, their duty to get justice for Vogel's victims. There's a lot at stake. They could have returned to Israel and announced that they had failed. But look at what's on the line: their personal self-esteem; Mossad's enviable reputation; their country's national honour; and, their moral obligation to the dead, to ensure that justice is carried out.

So, what do they decide to do? They decide to lie. It's a voluntary cognitive act to engage in a cover-up. It's a lie amongst themselves, to their families, to their country, and to their ancestors, the ones to whom they owe the debt. So, by lying, failure is overcome and they return as heroes, their self-esteem and reputations protected.

We know that it's a lie, a cover-up, of history. Their status as heroes is hollow. We know, like them, what really happened. This creates a tension – in them, and in us. It sets up a juxtaposition between the reality of what happened on the one hand and the false narrative with which they must live on the other. Will the truth explode the myth? Or will the narrative stand and become the official version of history?

Would it matter if the lie had never been uncovered? There are many justifications for lying: protecting reputation; maintaining an image of personal success is another, and these factors certainly played a role in the decision of the three young agents. They likely also sensed that the truth would never come to light and so the risk/reward ratio seemed slight.

Sometimes lying takes place for something greater than the lie itself, some greater good. In his dialogue, *The Laws*, Plato advanced the notion that society is justified in promulgating a foundational myth. He called it “the noble lie.” The noble lie is a deliberate falsehood that benefits society as a whole. For Plato, then, there are times when lying serves a greater good.

So, would any harm have been done if the truth about the mission never came to light? Was anyone the worse off for the deception? I’ll leave that question dangling.

Part Four: What we learn about Deception

At its core, deception is a power move, an imposition. That is, deception represents an attempt to impose on others belief in or acceptance of a false narrative, one that differs from what really happened. It’s a triumph of the self over others for personal gain. It’s a manipulation of those who are not usually in a position to judge. The deceived accept the alternate truth on the basis of trust. Deception is, of course, a violation of that trust, for the deceiver knows that he/she is taking advantage of the person to whom the lie is told.

So, deception represents a deliberate act of the self, to control the thoughts and feelings of others, through a false narrative, undertaken for reasons of self-interest.

Once a person has lied, living with the lie requires constant vigilance. The deception has to be maintained and safeguarded. Deception management becomes a daily preoccupation – to keep up the lie and to guard against possible exposure. In a sense, liars have to wear a cloak of deception, to maintain a fictitious outward persona. Rachel and Stefan are clearly uncomfortable at the book launch. David, it seems, broods: he cannot accept the deception. He’s conflicted between the lie and the truth and he roams the world, looking for Vogel. Vogel, too, is involved in a cover-up of his own, constantly suspicious of his patients and on the look-out for exposure.

Another important aspect of deception is this: in a successful deception, trust plays an important role. The deceived want to believe the deceiver. The deceived are primed to accept, even welcome, the deception because it fulfills some internal need they have.

In *The Debt*, the deceived want to believe the heroic deceivers. Believing that they carried out their mission successfully appeals to their sense of what is right and fair. It simultaneously enhances national pride and boosts their own self-esteem. At a deeper level, it pays off the debt to the dead, to those who had been victimized by Vogel. The Mossad, the government, the press, the people of Israel – everyone wants to believe that the mission had been a success. They have no reason to doubt. This trust feeds into the power of the lie giving it validity and reinforcement.

The constant vigilance in creating and then sustaining a massive deception changes the personality of the liar. It sets up in the deceiver a defense mechanism. They have to maintain

their self-perception as heroes all the while knowing that they are not. They become fearful of the day when the lie might be exposed. If that were to happen, their whole world would explode and their status as mythologized heroes would evaporate. Perhaps that is why the older characters do not look much like the younger ones. Their lives have been dramatically changed. They have changed. Perhaps the director has signaled this aspect of deception in a subtle way ... or, possibly, it was just a casting matter.

At its root, deception is an attempt to control -- to impose a fake narrative on to something that really happened. The film portrays the empty, desperate and fearful lives the protagonists endure, always concerned about exposure.

As it turns out, Vogel is still alive. A journalist is about to interview him and let the world in on the secret that there has been a massive cover-up, a fraud of international proportions. David, who has been hunting Vogel down for years, commits suicide, perhaps as Stefan thinks because he fears exposure or perhaps because he believes that Rachel will perpetuate the lie to save her daughter's reputation. Rachel, however, decides to rectify the situation and the film quickly moves to her completing the mission.

So, Vogel is killed. Rachel leaves a note for the journalist describing what really happened. Thus, the world comes to know the truth. The historical record is set straight, only with the killing occurring now rather than earlier. But what happens next, after this revelation? The aftermath is not explored. Are the agents dishonoured, defamed? Is there any fallout on the daughter who has unwittingly perpetuated the lie in print? We don't know.

One final thought: Sir Walter Scott wrote this in 1808:

"Oh! What a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive."

Sir Walter Scott (Marmion, 1808)

References

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