THE SILVER SCREEN AS MIRROR

Investigating Servant-Leadership in American Film

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Movies have entranced me from a young age and have been a faithful companion throughout my life. The mystery and allure of the silver screen has been explained in a myriad of ways to justify why the visual medium from the Hollywood blockbuster to the Sundance auteur film have a developed and committed following. Film theorists cite reasons like escapism, empathetic catharsis through emotional practicing, and shared storytelling to describe the motivations of film-going audiences (Barsam & Monahan, 2017; Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2018; Truby, 2008). Physically, the process of viewing film is the result of encountering images projected onto a screen which diffusely reflects both the light and the shadow projected on to them. The projection of shadow and light, inherently affirmed in the reality of being human, makes film a vital mirror for human suffering, humility, generosity, vulnerability, and wholeness.

For me, film represents not an alternate reality, but a mirrored lens in which complex thoughts, stories, and emotions can be processed in a peaceful, contemplative, and creatively vigorous environment. When I consider the sheer number of people, resources, and time committed to any single project as the credits roll at the end of the film, I am awestruck by the collective effort needed to construct a piece of art through this medium (Baumann, 2001).

Despite the reality of the director or director's team as the foundation of a film's artistic vision, that vision must be effectively communicated and collaboratively constructed by hundreds and thousands of others. This represents a true act of collective leadership, existing in the communicative and collaborative space rather than the individualistic Western mindset of the "Great Leader."

Greenleaf (2008), in introducing the servant-leader, also ponders the modern prophet. Sharing uncommon wisdom in everyday life, Greenleaf stated: "Men and women of a stature equal to the greatest prophets of the past are with us now, addressing the problems of the day and pointing to a better way to live fully and serenely in these times" (p. 32). In great films truly generative dialogue can be engaged with modern-day prophets and servant-leaders seeking to better understand the nature of the human condition through the stories we tell each other. Carey (2005) expands on the idea of film as an integral foundation for understanding leadership: "Good case studies and films, even when fictional, are true, in that they give us insights into the way things really are" (p. 258). To actively embrace the hidden and covert meanings of film and welcome the possibility of being changed by our emotional responses and interpretations of art allows for a new awareness to be born.

By mirroring ourselves, our stories, shadows, faults, glory, and love through the immersive medium of film, we can choose to engage in an open dialogue with well-discerned art in order to investigate our true or potential selves (Blumer, 2010). Whether film acts as a form of radiance as in the ancient history of uplift found in Shakespeare's comedies, using ascending emotional conclusions representing transcendence toward our higher selves, or through the pain and suffering found in Shakespeare's tragedies exposing the

darker side of violence done to ourselves and each other, the reaction of the audience affirms a disposition of the culture and the inherent nature of how art creates deepening, expansion, and transcendence of our shared humanity.

To look at film intently is more than simply a suspension of disbelief. The controlling narrative beliefs we carry with us in our everyday lives can be suspended along with the intellectual analysis and interpretive depth on display in the theater and our lives can open in unexpected ways. In suspending a beholden story about ourselves, we are awakened to the innumerable possibilities of our future. Greenleaf (2010) describes this awakened state as a form of awareness of creativity and deep transformation: "Oh that we could just be open in the presence of symbols that cry out to speak to us, let our guards down, and take the risks of being moved!" (p. 27). The act of gazing into the silver mirror is akin to the letting go of the analytical mind in order to be fully present to the collective wisdom being shared by the director, the actors, the crew, the music, and the storytelling.

Visionary avant-garde director Terrance Malick's works (*The Thin Red Line, Tree of Life, Song to Song*) often challenge the need for an analytical story to be laid before an audience, and instead lean into the embrace of film as memory and experience. Van der Linden's (2017) analysis of Malick's directorial gaze as reflection highlights a sense of work avoidance in the attempt to simply analyze to break down film as art. Comparatively, walking alongside the provoking nature of directors and their gaze allows us to see ourselves in a new light. "This aesthetic attempts to provoke in viewers a reflexive questioning by juxtaposing contrary ideas, emotions, and filmic conventions and sustaining these contraries in a lasting, unresolved tension" (Stivers, 2012, p. 6). Malick's

filmmaking process creates a symbolic natural world, a wilderness within us alongside the external wilderness, that calls out to us.

Physically, the light cast upon a white surface to present images through the integration of shadow, beckons viewers to look more deeply into the metaphorical shadow. One way in which director Ava DuVernay (*Selma, When They See Us, 13th*) views the act of filmmaking as the process in which the self can be seen on screen as a complex being, showing a side of ourselves we typically do not investigate: "The experience of watching authentic vulnerability on the screen helps us to understand that we don't have to be ever invulnerable, ever strong, ever inviolable, ever emotionless, even though this world seems to demand this of us" (Myers, 2018). DuVernay continues her response to Meyer's inquiry noting that when we become attuned to a one-dimensional version of ourselves, we are less authentic, and the goal of filmmaking is to show a uniquely unguarded side.

Indeed, gazing upon the shadow in film allows us to more openly embrace the shadow side of our own humanity. Carl Jung, in discussing this shadow side of human nature, explains that a person can only become aware of their own faults through careful and considered effort. "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is" (Jung, 1958/1969, p. 77). Psychology cautions against investigating bluntly into one's faults and the darker avenues of the soul, and instead suggests a loving embrace of the shadow to be able to converse with the shadow on terms of greater peace and a humble vulnerability that is bolstered by the more elusive elements of human maturity such as patience, kindness, goodness, self-control, and grace. The silver mirror allows for a softened engagement with our reflective selves. In reviewing research into movie watching as

healing, Heston and Kottman (1997) found film to provide just enough distance and familiarity to be a curative force. “Movie viewing, whether prescribed or serendipitous, can frequently give [people] a new perspective for looking at the ‘characters’ in their own lives and give them added clarity into the fundamental complexity of close interpersonal relationships” (p. 92).

Servant-leaders, purposefully engaged in greater health, wisdom, autonomy, and freedom, can increase individual and collective awareness by interacting with the shadow, and film as the silver mirror provides ample opportunity to do so. Cultivating such awareness creates what Greenleaf (2010) refers to as *awakeners*, open to the emergent and generative forces available to us all. Such awakeners help prevent the cultural violence that comes from being asleep to the ways we are interconnected:

> The blinders which block our conscious access to our own vast awareness are the uncompensated losses we have sustained; and the errors we have acquired from our cultural inheritance, from the undigested residues of our own experience, and from our conscious learning. (p. 37)

Exploring the phenomenon of leadership in film I want to look more closely at the following seven films: *Selma, Crash, Doubt, Smoke Signals*, *The Crucible*, *La La Land,* and *Hell or High Water*. Through the use of cinematic analysis and a greater understanding of the shadow, an artistic sense of being can lead us to more wholistic vision of servant-leadership.

SELMA

An intuitive step into the foray of leadership is often found in films that depict the strong performance of a leader, and so it is natural to start with a prominent figure of servant-leadership in

American history. Martin Luther King Jr., in Ana DuVernay's (2014) docudrama *Selma* is undeniably human and shapes viewers to consider the communal unity that lies beyond the shadow, helping us reach for the best in ourselves and others. DuVernay's gaze as focused on MLK, reveals subtle, elegant, and also hard-won leadership lessons gleaned from the civil rights movement, and yet the film does more than simply reflect a chronological telling of the events as they historically unfolded. DuVernay's attention to detail, commitment to the elegant complexity of character, screen writing, set design, camera motion, editing pace, and ultimately use of light and color are all elements she and her team use to speak something resonant with the movement's legacy.

While DuVernay, like many artists, often resists the temptation of prescribing a single interpretation of her films and chooses to honor the majesty of how art entrances all of us differently, she has commented about her mindset in filmmaking. Describing her work as a radically feminist perspective on historical figures as complex artifacts, DuVernay compares a soft-eyed, feminist paradigm, more transparent and revelatory, distinctly in opposition to the traditional dominant-masculine and often controlling gaze of the camera (Martin, 2014). "DuVernay subscribes to the ethos that art serves a social purpose, debunks demeaning and normative assumptions about black people, and renders black humanity in all manner of genres and complexity" (p. 57). Director Céline Sciamma describes the feminine gaze in movies as a new paradigm that is able to see persons as fully human and not as objects, and as a force for social change. "Of course, every movie is political, some people just deny it because they like the world the way it is" (Lott-Lavigna, 2020).

Amidst an American political landscape that would rather consider racism as "solved" by the ending of government sanctioned

segregation, the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1968 (King, 1969), and the eventual election of the nation's first black President, *Selma* demonstrates through the silver mirror the pain felt still today and the yearning for a more free and just society. Greenleaf's (1996) language, reflecting the same spirit of Dr. King's own words, considers the collective work that needs to be done, much like the social activist in the movie: "My search, therefore, day to day, is for a path through the maze along which people are accepted as they are and which leads to a world that is more benign" (p. 113).

Greenleaf's (1996) reflections in his essays collected in *On Becoming a Servant Leader* focus on the difference between a leaderless world and a world filled with leadership. Leadership requires an awareness of an interconnected reality that treats persons as ends in themselves no longer requiring a manipulated or illegitimate use of power. DuVernay's (2014) artistic vision makes use of a harsh white light to depict the structural and systematic racism woven explicitly into the politics of the Johnson administration, as well as implicitly into federal law. This hard-white light is shown frequently throughout the film, through the lettering sharing communications in the FBI, as well as the props and set design in the Alabama towns.

This hard-edged tonality is most easily seen when compared to the warm and soft-toned light of golden yellow hues that cascade into the church scenes of Birmingham, the King household, and Brown Chapel. DuVernay (2014) continues to connect the loving force of the civil rights movement with warm yellow tones through yellow accent pieces that surround the little girls' clothing after the bombing of the Birmingham Baptist Church and most notably in Coretta Scott King's wardrobe design. Greenleaf (2002) addresses the interpretive meaning that comes with attempting to rationalize

the exact messaging of artistic symbolism: “Loss, every loss one’s mind can conceive of, creates a vacuum into which will come (if allowed) something new and fresh and beautiful, something unforeseen—and the greatest of these is love” (pp. 339-340). While the exact rational mind’s explanation of the comparison between the absence of color in the white light of the federal buildings and the golden hue around the homes of the civil rights movement is directly annealed into the viewers conscious and unconscious experience, there is a more elusive and formidable presence in the gap between them: a powerful force of love that stands both within and beyond race and time.

Looking beyond the surface of the great man approach to leadership by analyzing the actions of Dr. King during the plot of *Selma*, a new awareness rises in the restorative power represented by Coretta in the film. Great Man leadership theory stems from the early 20th century studies of the innate attributes attributed to accomplished men in social, political, and military realms (Northouse, 2015). Rejecting a conception of leadership as inert and demonstrated by a dominant culture’s understanding of positional power creates room for the emergent properties of a community-oriented leadership style. DuVernay’s (2014) interpretation of Dr. King as a complex figure eases the transition us out of the hero worship and objectification of historical figures. In rejecting a traditional script that might only include protesting in the name of peace, DuVernay chooses to embrace the complexity of Dr. King’s marital disloyalty and the flaws of his temperament. “I never fear putting that stuff in there. I never think twice about including some description of a quiet moment or internal thought” (Myers, 2018). By depicting a story of complexity and fully human characters, DuVernay balances the grace of MLK’s legacy against the

contentious and dubious nature of the curated historical records of his public and private life. “Government intelligence documents should always be treated with great care – particularly documents from an era when J Edgar Hoover and the FBI expressed open hostility toward the civil rights movement” (Murch, 2019).

DuVernay’s direction in *Selma*, focused on a higher dimensionality of character, political atmosphere, and aesthetic, elevates her film beyond entertainment into art (Baumann, 2001). Through the composition of white lighting for the FBI, to the soft golden hues in the King household, to the rapid editing between speeches about complacency and being uncomfortable with change, to a cut to the two white men in the church pews, DuVernay’s film as a whole reinforces a message of the emotions created by division and segregation. Symbolic settings for both the civil rights movement, and the story of *Selma*, like the Edmund Pettus Bridge, act as a keystone to the climax of the film. The bridge, named after a Confederate brigadier general, is painted white demonstrating the persistent loneliness and detachment of dominant culture even when attempting to find connection (O’Neill, 2015).

Symbolizing the women of the movement that support from behind the invisible curtain of the home, Coretta shows her loving embrace and forgiveness of Dr. King as a husband, acceptance and integration of Malcom X to their peace movement, and their combined effort to demand societal change from love rather than polarization. “The servant as leader always empathizes, always accepts the person but sometimes refuses to accept some of the person’s efforts or performance as good enough” (Sipe & Frick, 2009, p. 58). DuVernay’s film contains an essence which allows all of us to embrace our shadow, thereby including people of all races, genders, and life experience in a new vessel of awareness, the

possibilities of forgiveness, and the long road to atonement. Both Coretta and her husband demonstrate a loving embrace of the American public, seeking to pursue necessary change through peaceful disruption.

CRASH

The silver mirror does not show only the idealized version of the self. *Crash*, with its interwoven chaos of both tragedy and transcendence, buries the viewer in the darker side of the shadow before allowing for light's emergence. In this film the utility of reflecting greater justice, wisdom and love, is brought about by directly channeling the human shadow, specifically through where the spotlight of attention is trained. Paul Haggis's (2004) *Crash* is often lambasted for its blunt use of racism in story. The genesis of the screenplay is certainly troubling. Stemming from Haggis's dream about his own carjacking as he projects potential stories around who the two kids were demonstrates a privilege and assertion of fantasized experience of bodies of color rather than a seeking to understand (Jacobs, 2015). Haggis's ability to engage or not engage with the questions of race depicts white privilege in deciding when racial disparity and social discourse impacts a white man, myself included. "I love investigating things that really trouble me … To ask a question that isn't being asked and then let others make a comment and decide what it is you're talking about or what they think about it" (Arabian, 2017). Taking into account the inherently privileged foundation of the writing informs the questions *Crash* raises, along with the film's ability to enthrall and elicit a strong reaction in its viewers.

The uncomfortable feeling of watching the layered story telling of *Crash* allows for introspection to determine what about the traumatic events on the screen makes us recoil and how that

reflection can shape our own future behaviors, personally, cross-culturally, nationally, and globally. Haggis speaks towards the shadow reflected on the screen as he breaks down how *Crash* leans into racial stereotypes in the first third in order to place a particular audience reaction into the story. “It’s in the dark, it’s okay no one’s going to see you laughing at the Hispanics or the Asian drivers, and then, once I made you comfortable, I could twist you around and leave you spinning” (VanDerWerff, 2015). Notably, Haggis’s reflection comes from his own experienced reality and may be totally unrelated to the reality of others, especially persons of color who may relate to the depiction of violent oppression differently than he does. However, the disparity of racial sensitivity between the first act of the film and the last act is an attempt to guide a societal conversation around a current dialogue and treatment of identities in a world of multiple cultural foundations.

Haggis doesn’t shy away from implicating his own bias, in placing his own surrogate as a source of extreme violence. “No, the people who pay the biggest price in this movie are the people who think they know who they are, who have this pride and think they’re good people” (Jacobs, 2015). In constructing characters in the likeness of overt bigots as well as the more subtle forms of ignorance to ongoing societal oppression, Haggis constructs a filmmatic mirror aimed at highlighting denial. The comfort of the theater-going experience allows for this stark cradling of the ego, echoing or perhaps demonstrating the audience’s personal societal violence while taking viewers along a path towards a new understanding of our interconnected nature.

The ensemble performance is realized through Haggis’s use of parallel structure, a stylized edit that depicts the events from one character to be temporally juxtaposed with the situation of a

seemingly disjointed other character (Barsam & Monahan, 2017). As Haggis (2004) tackles topics of oppression from racism, classist structures, corrupt policing and politicking, sexual abuse, and the challenges of raising children with love instead of fear, the parallel structure allows for a contemporary awareness of the interdependence of everyone, a unity that resides below the vicious patterns of othering that generate tension, conflict, and ultimately violence.

As both screen writer and director, Haggis (2004) chooses to open the film with a dialogic voiceover as a framing device for the events about to unfold: “In L.A., nobody touches you. We’re always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something.” Speaking through Don Cheadle’s character, Detective Waters, Haggis contemplates the dangers of the illusion of rugged individualism that threatens the interconnected nature of a collective society. By the end of the film, the quote’s multivalent context is revealed through the events of the movie, further conflating the seemingly separate and sequential nature of society.

Greenleaf (1998) is keenly aware of how, under extreme pressure and immediacy, primal instincts can limit our ability to think globally. “The only reason you will ever be aware of a problem is that your understanding of yourself, of other people involved, and of the area in which the problem lies is limited” (p. 66). The danger of continuing to live in the delusion of a separated society that allows for the distancing and othering of a neighbor is laid bare by the editing and structure of *Crash*. The act of servant-leadership is to train the mind and spirit, with others, to seek to understand both when the heat is off and when it blazes full force, so that we are more aware and see through the illusion of disconnection to

transform a problem into an opportunity for generative healing (Greenleaf, 1996).

To address the misconception of rugged individualism as good and true, to the truth that it is an inherent limiter of societal growth, Greenleaf (1998) uses the term *entheos,* resurrecting the term from the old lexicon, meaning the intuitive feeling of oneness, of wholeness, and rightness. With *entheos:* "all people are seen as beings to be trusted, believed in, and loved, less as objects to be used, competed with, or judged. It is a shifting of the balance from use to esteem in all personal relationships" (p. 75).

Contributing to the feeling of oneness, Haggis's (2004) plot structure connects seemingly separate plot threads as they all collide together in the final acts of the film. From the wife of a famous director being sexually assaulted in a racially-charged environment by a police officer to then be pulled from a burning car by the same officer, the camera moves to a Persian shop owner firing a blank gun at the daughter of a locksmith before shifting to the meeting of a carjacker and an off-duty officer that ends in homicide. This homicide ends up being the brother of Detective Waters. By the time the end credits roll, every character is inextricably tied to every other character in ways unforeseen and resounding with gravitas.

While a diverse alignment of plot threads ties into one another to weave an interconnected tapestry reflecting some of the worst horrors of modern society, *Crash* does not resolve neatly or with a positive message with which to walk out of the theater. Inside this film's long observation of the human shadow, the reflective mirror it provides also does not necessitate a tragic ending resulting in a pessimistic societal outlook. The film leaves audiences somewhere in the middle, between tragedy and transcendence. A fitting embodiment of human good and human shadow. "A servant-leader is

determined to see life in all its glorious messiness without all the loose ends tied up in neat, simplistic bows" (Greenleaf, as cited in Sipe & Frick, 2009, p. 136).

DOUBT

Foresight is commonly considered to be a sense of knowing of an uncertain future. Analytically, the construction of leadership foresight is posited in its own logical contradiction. It is by the very nature of a path's unfolding that it cannot be fully known until it is explored thoroughly, and so it is through the aporia of knowing the unknowable that the servant-leader engages. John Patrick Shanley's (2008) film *Doubt* explores the framing of uncertainty, and by extension foresight, not directed towards an awareness of the future as it has yet to unfold, but rather as a new kind of knowing, through the kind of humility that chooses doubt over certainty. As the winds of change blow wildly on the set, which Shanley's commentary on the DVD bonus features suggests is both intentionally added and incidental during filming, the use of tense intelligent dialogue conveys a profound intuition in the midst of ever-present doubt (Tueth, 2008).

In addressing the adaptation of his stage play by the same name, Shanley embraces the ambiguity of progressive change. "That lack of humanity in conversation, in debate—in politics, in religion, in anything—leads to airlessness, and loneliness, and I'm against it" (Dubov, 2017). Shanley refers to a righteous person acting with certainty as wielding a "will to power" to be used against those who do not agree. The authentic power of *Doubt* comes not from an assertion of right, progressiveness, or the certainty of truth, but from a dedication to one's lived values and the wellbeing of others.

Early in the film, Shanley uses well-trodden moral narratives in order to lull the audience into the comfort and pseudo-safety that

comes from condemning particular actions, behaviors, and character traits (Kennedy, 2015). The reflective mirror is shown when doubt is cast on the legitimacy of the scandal throughout the movie, or whether taking retributive justice would ultimately result in true safety and actual well-being. The power that comes from this compressed, contained storytelling, using only four characters and minimal settings, resides in the viewers inability to discern a single measurable reality. Thus we must juggle our own reactions to the characters themselves.

Meryl Streep's character, Sister Aloysius, is filmed from below, as if she were a tower of certainty, and at a Dutch angle during her internal turmoil as she contemplates the possibility of Father Flynn's abuse of a student. Shanley's direction of the camera's gaze toward Sister Aloysius helps convey the pervasive interpersonal power she exerts over the school, making her physicality more like an essence of the building itself and a force of nature rather than simply an administrator. Alfonso Cuarón, critically acclaimed director known for his long shots and intricate cinematography, considers the role of the camera as another character in the movie. He refers to the camera as a ghost as it reflects on the plot, characters, and dialogue throughout the scene (Hunt, 2020).

If Cuarón's camera lens is a ghost in the reflection of time, Shanley's (2008) lens on Sister Aloysius acts as a spiritual guide and judge over the adherence to the Catholic faith and dedication to the education and development of young people. Given the divine spiritual nature of the camera, *Doubt* is almost never stable, or certain, and refuses to linger as the progression of the film barrels wildly into an uncertain future. Despite positional authority, Father Flynn is often depicted from an elevated vantage point, creating a strong hierarchical spiritual positioning, reducing a perceived power

within the walls of the school. Meanwhile, the sisters are often viewed from a level point or slightly lowered angle, revealing a subtle, influential, yet largely unspoken power. Yet the lens is rarely near any of the characters. The lack of a close-up presents another abstinence of intimacy, a separation from the certainty of faith and a near angelic wrestling with foresight as the film ponders the truth and what is ethically good.

I am reminded of Hermon Hesse's (1998) *Journey to the East* which inspired Greenleaf's (2002) writings on the servant as leader, as the servant Leo disappears from the group only to later be revealed as prophet of generative and life-giving force who carefully guides the human condition through a journey of learning, healing, and communing together. During the pivotal scene in which Father Flynn and Sister Aloysius confront each other about the allegations laden in *Doubt*, the Sister expresses prophetic knowing while Shanley (2008) frames her as trapped between symbols of faith, masculine systems of power, and the foundation of education for the nation's youth.

When confronted with her oath to the Church to abide by the rules and instructions of Father Flynn, Sister Aloysius brandishes her crucifix as a sword, wielding her own faith framed by a slightly downward gaze and a portrait of Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first native born Euro-American to be canonized by the Catholic Church, gazing in the Sister's direction. Sister Aloysius' response is to rely upon her own experience and internal wisdom as it relates to what benefits not only the potentially abused child, but for all of the current and future students of the school. "If one enters a situation prepared with the necessary experience and knowledge at a conscious level, in the situation the intuitive insight necessary for one's optimal performance will be forthcoming" (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 39). For

Greenleaf, the aspect of faith is not the doctrine of orders, rules, and practices—it comes from the marriage of experience and intuitive wisdom to guide our collective forces towards a generative future.

The foresight of Sister Aloysius comes not from rational certainty of the unknowable future. She wields a different sort of knowing. This way of knowing, intuitive and sometimes fierce, is the lead of leadership that Greenleaf (2002) describes; a sense of foresight which is the very foundation of the ethical servant-leader. "This is not a person who lives by codes or rules but rather one who knows the resources of inspiration and wisdom on which to draw and sees his or her experience as an extension of that tradition" (p. 168). So despite her revelation to Sister James in the ultimate scene of *Doubt*, in which Sister Aloysius has such doubts about a rationalized moral imperative and the pathway of the Church forward, she does not lack the foresight to behave as a strong servant-leader and tap into the mystery of the human condition.

SMOKE SIGNALS

"Stories can be very powerful ways to represent and convey complex, multidimensional ideas" (Conrad, 2016, p. 44). Stories within a story can connect both the audience and the characters emotionally and message a new way of meaning making within the reflected reality. Chris Eyre's (1998) *Smoke Signals* features Thomas Builds-the-Fire continuing the oral tradition of storytelling. Throughout the film the childhood friends connected by a tragic house fire, Victor and Thomas, travel off of the Coeur D'Alene Indian Reservation to Phoenix, Arizona to collect Victor's late father's belongings. The physical and metaphorical character journey handles the subject of an absent father, toxic masculinity, forgiveness, and societal oppression from the Western paradigm upon Indigenous Peoples, all while peppered with stories from

Thomas about Indian identity and his recollection of different persons in the tribe.

Further exploring the story inside the story, Eyre (1998) positions the film not just as a story of reservation life but also a film about the industrially dominant machine of Hollywood. The comparison of Indian representation sharing the same screen as Western figures like John Wayne is explicitly linked through the story telling mechanisms of the film:

> *Smoke Signals* announces itself as a form of indigenous media in the opening shots that link the reservation landscape with the voice and then image of the K-REZ radio headquarters—a weathered trailer home—and its MC, Randy Peone (John Trudell), a prominent American Indian Movement activist in the 1970s. (Hearne, 2005, p. 193)

The hybrid nature of the oral tradition being used to describe Hollywood figures transforms the film into an emblem of the representational power of storytelling. Fanon (2011) illustrates the colonialization process does not simply subjugate diaspora, it also seeks through a controlling retelling of history to shape by distortion the very historic identity once held.

To protect and remain owner and holder of that identity, Hall (1989) describes the necessity of continually producing and retelling the original story. The matter of telling a story—especially one that abides in its own cultural context and medium rather than through the machine of a dominant colonialized system—is a process of identity creation. “We must not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative re-discovery. ‘Hidden histories’ have played a critical role in the emergence of some of the most important social movements of our time” (p. 69). Thomas can be seen as the surrogate of Eyre (1998) and his crew in

the continual retelling, reshaping, and reclaiming of an authentic cultural narrative.

Eyre (1998) does not make it clear for the first half of the film whether Thomas' gift of storytelling is from a deep well of memory and identity, or if the stories themselves are simply fictional tall tales. *Smoke Signals* blurs the line between the realistic and the absurd, able to address heavy and dark topics with a levity that still speaks towards the nuanced telling of adult identity development. Thomas' use of story expresses the creative forces of the servant-leader attending to the human condition. Greenleaf (2002) reflects upon Camus' reconciliation of the absurdity of life and thus imagining Sisyphus happy:

> Albert Camus stands apart from the other great artists of his time, in my view, and deserves the title of prophet because of his unrelenting demand that each of us confront the exacting terms of our own existence, and, like Sisyphus, accept our rock and find our own happiness in dealing with it. (p. 25)

Greenleaf's (2002) description of Camus as prophet for his storytelling ability to compare the myth of Sisyphus to the absurdity of the dominant rational mind of human society is found in the prophetic wisdom Thomas shares. Thomas' stories derive from a collective presence, akin to collective memory, helping develop, heal, and creatively construct a shared identity and meaning making practice. As Nelles (2002) writes, the embedded story acts as a means of truth discernment within the fictionalized narrative previously established. However, Thomas left on his own is depicted by Eyre (1998) as woefully idealistic, ungrounded and thus unable to relate his generative optimistic outlook to his peers. It is through Victor's character and their unlikely partnership that the two start to be able to heal each other's relationship to, and mourning process of, Arnold.

With Thomas as prophet, and Victor as seeker, their partnership and bond build the essential qualities of the leader as servant:

> Prophet, seeker, and leader are inextricably linked. The *prophet* brings vision and penetrating insight. The *seeker* brings openness, aggressive searching, and good critical judgment—all within the context of the deeply felt attitude, "I have not yet found it." The *leader* adds the art of persuasion backed by persistence, determination, and the courage to venture and risk. (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 120)

The embedded story's influence can only reach so far in the narrative in which it is constructed. My own interaction with the story of Smoke Signals and my ability to react to the intended meaning of the story is regulated by my own ability to see my shadow cast upon the screen and the limitations that my own identity imposes compared to the shared history of the filmmakers. Indeed, cinema is a complex, awe-inspiring, and mystical medium to be able to share a sense of cultural identity formation, however it is not removed from a particular positioning within a society in which certain identities have subjugated others. So, when Eyre describes *Smoke Signals* as a "universal story about fathers and friends and forgiveness" (Johnston & Barsotti, 2013) there remains a vast cultural discrepancy between my own relationship and forgiveness process with my father.

Thomas' oral storytelling offers a moment of reprieve for the audience to reflect upon their own journey and reaction to the story being told to them. I cannot help but listen to Eyre's (1998) and think of my own relationship with my father, and what life will one day look like without him. Will my reaction be of the bright flames that brought forth a prophet archetypal Thomas, or the ashes of the destructive relationship that forged Victor's realism and distrust of

the self? The answer resides within my own contemplation and life's journey, but the call of the question arises from the embedded stories of the silver screen.

THE CRUCIBLE

When I first watched Hytner's (1996) film adaptation of the stage play *The Crucible,* I remember feeling like I was wanting a more artistic direction on the screen. At the time, to me artistic meant that it was doing something never before seen and I caught myself thinking "there's a more interesting or beautiful way to shoot this scene," neglecting that the restraint of the artists brush is equally intentional. The still, balanced, and leveled camera chosen by Hytner can, at quick glance, feel like it is missing a dynamic and in your face message. The choice of scenery is beautifully filmed on scene in Massachusetts, with a few scenic trips up to Nova Scotia, Canada (Filming & Production, n.d.), and yet the lighting is stagnant, depicting shots in overcast balanced lighting or in the dark of night. The polarized lighting source perplexed me until a court scene in which a dolly zoom and a shaft of bright light illuminate Goodie Proctor as she falsely confesses in an attempt to save her husband's pride in the courthouse. Hytner's (1996) cinematic restraint exposes the black and white morality at play in the paranoid town of Salem compared to the complicated dynamic ethics of a humanistic perspective.

The exploration of morality, systems of structure that govern the way we build community, and the source of legitimate power in *The Crucible* mirror Greenleaf's (2002) essays on the power of the servant-leader. "The issue then, as I see it, is not whether all manipulation can be brandished as evil, but rather, can some manipulation be made legitimate" (p. 151). Just as the day and night are not entities in and of themselves, and pull their meaning by their

relationship and absence of the opposite, the moral good of the servant-leader does not come from a strict code or list of well-defined laws to order societal behavior, nor a retributive justice system (Ferch, 2012). In my experience the only legitimate power comes from the conscience in concert with others leaning us toward communal health, wisdom, freedom, autonomy, and service. Coercion by definition limits freedom and diminishes the power of others by expecting power over them. Manipulation without consciousness is a subtler version of exercising that same power to limit the agency of others.

Expanding on the comparison of the rigid system of a polarized sense of justice and morality in Salem, John Proctor stands firm by refusing to sign his name on a false statement. While seeming to abide by the pride of his own identity, Hytner (1996) focuses on the dialogue about the sacrifice of other speakers of truth in Salem that were sacrificed so that John could have the opportunity now. Juxtaposed to the steadfast Judge Danforth, John contributes more to the future society of Salem by reducing fear and choosing generative opportunities for his neighbor. “Top leaders in all institutions have the opportunity to reduce the sense of crisis in our times by helping everyone involved to understand the responsibility that freedom entails” (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 79).

The dualistic lighting nature of Hytner’s (1996) mise en scène, or everything the camera shows, highlights the darkest aspects of the human potentiality for violence, distrust, vengeance, and hoarding of wealth in which nearly all accusations and arrests happen under the cover of darkness. Combined with a strong and stable framing of the courthouse this paints a picture of the attempt to control and consolidate the authority of the majority power, which is antithetical to the living nature of a dynamic, breathing, and ultimately free

world. Greenleaf (1998) decries the attempts at isolating and hoarding power as a disillusionment to the interconnected nature of a human society, especially compared to the legitimate power that comes from sharing and promulgating power through authentic interpersonal relationship. “In truth, sharing power only increases the abundant currency of power for everyone, and the likelihood of success of the mission” (Greenleaf, as cited in Sipe & Frick, 2009, p. 164).

Entering into the dialectic of political power, Arthur Miller (1996) considers what motivated his allegory of the Salem Witch Trials as a mirror-form of the politics of the Red Scare. Miller chose an artistic outlet to investigate the deeper connection. “I lacked the tools to illuminate miasma. Yet I kept being drawn back to it” (para. 11). Hytner (1996) is able to use film as the medium to explore the same ideas as Miller, and drive home the connection to politics of the 90s. I am reminded of the body politics that occur today with a school to prison pipeline run rampant, and increasingly severe immigration and border policies.

The sort of miasma of the Red Scare and the Salem Witch Trials also rings awfully familiar in an age of crying fake news, political bias, insider trading, cancel culture, and PR firms attempting to bust unions. When the reaction to seeing societal and systematic failings is to “raise awareness” looks identical to the exact evils it is trying to point out, how can any sort of truth or reality be communicated?

Miller reacts by doing more than raising awareness of his truth. He creatively constructs something that is able to transform us through multiple frames of reference and empathetic avenues (Miller, 1996). Miller’s play, and Hytner’s (1996) movie adaptation, convey a paradigm of struggle in a time where truth is uncertain. In effect John Proctor must understand his actions as a sinner, or more

genuinely embrace his shadow, recognizing his piece of the problem before he can effectively relate to the rest of Salem. Similarly, Miller faced his own shadows before he could write the play. Rather than give up his own friends when pressured by governmental forces, he went to prison to maintain his loyalty to them.

To engage in the leadership action of truth-speaking is an act of balancing our own shadow and light in order to relate a distinct perception of reality to others, knowing the movie of our mind does not convey a filmic language that can otherwise be convincing. To speak my own truths, *The Crucible's* restrained filmmaking is a helpful reminder of the incidental messages and power dynamics that share our interdependence and shared construction of meaning.

LA LA LAND

In many screenplays, the way to progress the plot forward comes from dialogue. While skilled screenwriters use the adage 'show don't tell', Damien Chazelle's (2016) musical *La La Land* allows the music to convey a dazzling plot ascension. Chazelle's movie musical creates a dialogue between a grounded reality and the dreamlike state of pursuing "the dream" in love and vocation through a unique marriage of on stage recording and fantastical musical sequences (Barsam & Monahan, 2017). Seb and Mia both pursue their dreams and relationships through a listening-first disposition.

The music of *La La Land* contains a magnificent mix of classical roots combined with jazz flair all while mirroring the relationship of Mia and Sebastian. Mia's background in theater and desire to thrive in Hollywood is entrenched in the classics and finds peace amid the safe and cozy four chords of "Another Day of Sun" (Hurwitz, 2016, track 1) and "Someone in the Crowd" (track 2). Sebastian's jazz obsession represents his refusal to settle, ambitious drive, and creativity, expressed in his jazzy interludes on "A Lovely Night"

(track 4) and the introduction of "Mia & Sebastian's Theme" (track 3). The music theory of jazz is based on a home chord from which improvisation grows (Terefenko, 2014). While chasing new heights, intervals, and rhythms from the home base chord, jazz finds new creative structures like the dreams and ambitions of Mia and Sebastian's individual and relationship goals. However, "pure" jazz, or unadulterated risk taking is unsustainable without the classic and homey base chord foundation. Ultimately the jazz melody line must return back to the home chord, even as it returns forever changed—sometimes literally changed with a diminished note in the chord, or simply a new leading interval.

The recurring melody line of "City of Stars" (Hurwitz, 2016, track 6) epitomizes the tension between safety, and comfort with the risk and creativity, using four notes to create a classical line and lyrics dreaming of a different reality. The tune is reprised after Mia and Sebastian's duet with a jazzy take practically leaving the first four notes behind. In an attempt to convey his own passion for jazz to a skeptical Mia, Seb explains jazz is a ritual of listening to the musical dialogue. Engaging with Greenleaf's (2002) description of a servant-leader being motivated with a disposition to listen first, Seb and Mia continue to be attuned to the other's needs as well as the shifting landscape of the acting and musical world. As their relationship navigates a grounded reality amidst Hollywood backlot sets and hazy jazz clubs, towards the starry dreamscape of the classic cinema and observatory, the classic and jazz melodies are combined in the exploration of the individual and collective dream.

The music of *La La Land* is diegetic, and therefore lifted further by each of the characters, helping to pull the audience's experience and expectations of a movie musical along in the journey Mia and Sebastian share. Chazelle explains the couple embracing their

musical roots to engage with their relationship and their dreams: “By extension, when things start to go south with the characters, an idea the actors came up with and played with was this idea that they stop hearing the music at a certain point” (Robinson, 2016). Chazelle presents the danger of losing track of one’s dream in favor of a pragmatic approach for the absence of emotion. “There’s something so kind of brash and defiant and almost avant-garde about the idea of just breaking the normal rules of normal reality. Musicals just break that, and they break it in the name of emotion” (Gross, 2017). The ability to be enchanted by *La La Land* coincides with a deeper yearning for creativity, freedom, and the life-giving energy that leadership must attend to. The reflective nature of the movie affirms and dovetails with our own dreams of a heightened existence, rigorously challenging us in the heart and spirit to see just what that personal emergent reality might appear to be.

Chazelle’s (2016) use of the dream sequence and the mystery couched in the movie score is of great consequence to the movie’s plot. Dreaming in the observatory can be interpreted as a figurative representation of the couple’s relationship and the jumpstart of their careers. In my opinion, the use of dream as a reflection of a personal and shared vision is not coincidental. Greenleaf (2002) plays with the exploration of dream as an essential quality of leadership: “Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams” (p. 30). Being able to attune one’s self to an innate sense of purpose helps Seb and Mia listen to the evolving future and accept the possibilities as they arrive.

Expanding on the growing awareness that leaders acquire through a finely attuned sense of vision, Greenleaf’s (2010) essay on the Robert Frost poem *Directive* contemplates the risk of a strictly

rational understanding of the dream: “Those of us who undertake the journey must accept that, simply by living in the contemporary world and making our peace with it as it is, we may be involved in a way that blocks our growth” (p. 28). Just as jazz builds on the solid foundation of classical music by exploring unknown melodic pathways, a profound disposition for listening to the music of our passions, purpose, and reality provides a deeply creative power to both leading and following from a servant-led perspective.

HELL OR HIGH WATER

David Mackenzie’s (2016) film *Hell or High Water* is a modern take on the classic American Western movie genre, centered around the aftermath of the United States housing crisis. Mackenzie’s use of the genre is well suited as a modern myth of the American response to a devastating economic event. “Westerns are a form of modern mythology that offers narrative representations of Americans as rugged, self-sufficient individuals taming a savage wilderness with common sense and direct action” (Barsam & Monahan, 2017, p. 103). The fictional brothers, Toby and Tanner Howard seek to take control of their financial wellbeing, and in Toby’s case, the future welfare of his son, by stealing from a local banking branch in Texas. Playing into the cliché of cops versus robbers in the Western, Mackenzie (2016) creates a parallel duo in the Rangers Marcus Hamilton and Alberto parker: the former equally preoccupied with controlling his future, fueled by his fear of retirement and inability to seek retributive justice.

Mackenzie (2016) utilizes a modern West Texas setting to address the metanarratives of the Western genre as rooted in the oppression of indigenous populations. The film’s contemporary dialogues respond this fraught history and contribute to an overall theme of the seeming importance and prestige of the present day. The editing of *Hell or High Water* continues to play on a toxic

masculinity and toxic dominant culture motif with a cadence of long establishing shots against very scattered and quickly edited violent scenes. Mackenzie comments about his use of the long take as a means of gripping the emotion of the moment: "Sometimes, you can get more tension by not cutting. You're holding on to the audience" (Vishnevetsky, 2016). Looking at the structure of the movie, the major action is placed by Mackenzie in the first fifteen minutes, and the final thirty minutes of the movie. Tanner's solo robbery is committed almost entirely off screen. The continued inaction allows for the movie to contemplate the uncertainty of the events which both the characters and the audience are sure will happen eventually.

When considering how we conceive of the future and the present, Greenleaf (1996) describes typical Western dominant culture thought, the idea of the present as unconsciously or consciously forceful, and therefore as *disoriented*. In the disoriented state a person is limited in their ability to respond to phenomenon. Similarly, when a single question is being asked in a foreclosed manner, it appears a restricted answer is all we can give.

> Probably we don't *foresee* events; by our efforts, we bring the future into the present. This is partially the result of an attitude; we see it that way, we are overtaken by the feeling that present time is a wider span than the click of the camera shutter. (p. 75)

Mackenzie (2016) establishes interior obsession over the uncertain and uncontrollable future through dialogue surrounding death as characters' attempt to establish dominance over their lives by seeking to somehow control their inevitable demise. The disequilibrium of stretching the present into the past and the future is an act of manifesting, causing our preoccupations to bring forth an emergent future despite an attempt to control the uncontrollable (Scharmer, 2009).

Toby's plan to steal from Texas Midland Bank is not only an act of taking back control over the financial housing crisis economy crash, but also places the money into a trust to exert control over the land beyond his death. Ranger Hamilton frequently equates his retirement with a loss of purpose and mentions how he would rather go out in a blaze of glory as an act of controlling his own uncertain future. As the roads are ablaze with wildfire, the farmer explains he would rather just die if he could ensure the wellbeing of his family and crops. The theme of control, in planning and needing to stick to the plan, or policing by strict policy versus needing to pursue leads based on intuition and a sense of retributive justice is not just prevalent in the plot of the movie but also emphasized by Mackenzie's (2016) lingering edit. The edit controls the emotional feel of the movie, helping guide the temporal relationships the audience has with each scene, drawing mental focus from viewers by the ability to connect desperate ideas and guiding reflection (Barsam & Monohan, 2017). Yet, *Hell or High Water* does not seek to answer the philosophical implications of justice, poverty, and oppression and instead chooses to raise questions. "I don't pretend I know the answer. I just show the problem and hold the mirror up and say 'Hey, look at this, maybe here is the reason. Here's some of the good and then here is some of the bad'" (Minow, 2016).

Mackenzie's (2016) mirror of society is shown in rugged individualism and each character's relationship with individual courage. Personally, I consider it a simple task to recognize when courage is necessary to continue forward, and yet I find myself responding to the courageous call with a sense of ego. I would like to imagine I am not alone in feeling like, when challenged, to pull out the necessary energy to challenge a situation requires I behave more with the will to power rather than the will to love. I believe this

shadow, what I might call my ego shadow mirrored in the movie, is an antithetical viewpoint to that of the servant-leader. The film reminds me of the continued behavioral practice I need to undergo to more peacefully, and in my belief more rightly, face adversity.

Mackenzie (2016) foreshadows the courageous call with a scene depicted on the eve of the big heist, the brothers are already in full silhouette, embracing their full shadow and lacking any light for their own future. The next scene shows Toby in sepia on the same backdrop - foreshadowing their fate in the next thirty minutes of film time. “The practice of servant-leadership as embodied in the trait of humility requires courage of intentional vulnerability and voluntary surrender of one’s ego for the sake of others and the organization” (Sipe & Frick, 2009, p. 29). It can be easy to understand when courage is necessary, yet to act with courage does not always constitute an act of separation of the ego, and in effect, can often deaden the will to love, serve, and generate greater health, autonomy, freedom, and wisdom in the self and others.

THE CALL OF THE SILVER SCREEN

The silver screen as interior mirror helps us investigate the way we interact with reality. Whether through highlighting the great creative potential of servant-leadership through uplifting and radiant mirrors like *Selma, Smoke Signals,* and *La La Land,* or the inquisitive nature and the uncertain reality laid bare in *Doubt,* to the demonstration of the dark shadow of the human condition in *Crash, The Crucible,* and *Hell or High Water,* deeper insight and understanding is found in film. By continuing to investigate the collective message delivered by the director and the extensive film crew through the use of cinematic language as well as a reflection of our relationships with the art of film, we can become more attuned to the nature of our shared existence. Attending to this message

continues the dialogue with the creative potential that Greenleaf (2010) calls the *awakener*.

When we heed the call and listen to the deeper meaning of art and continue to reflect through the mirror that is the silver screen, a life of authentic love and power can be the unforeseen result. In reflecting on the messaging of Hesse's (1988) *Journey to the East*, Greenleaf (2002) ponders the role of the generative process of art and its subtle directive to elevate our understanding of our oneness. Evoking Camus' phrase, create dangerously, Greenleaf adds, "As we venture to create, we cannot project ourselves beyond ourselves to serve and lead" (p. 61). The interconnection that comes with a contemplative, open, and earnest dialogue with artistic messaging resonates with a respectful and provocative spirit of an authentic love and power.

The intentional and collaborative process of filmmaking is a servant-led endeavor inextricably tied to the wisdom and awareness of foresight into the shadow of our humanity. It is through a loving disposition that the shadow is seen and gently embraced to better ourselves, our loved ones, our acquaintances, and our oneness. "Love of oneself in the context of a pervasive love for one's fellow [human] is a healthy attribute and necessary for the fulfillment of life" (Greenleaf, 1998, p. 75). Following the joy of generative dialogue is a destructive act against the perceived boundaries of our interconnected potential ways of being. Gaze *awakened* into the reflective silver mirror, go out and create dangerously—the world needs you!

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