Argo – the Coded Truth

While discussing Rosenstone's and Parvulescu's collection of essays "A Companion to Historical Film", Ofer Ashkenazi distinguishes four paradigms that can be used to describe film's relations to the historic truth: "history as film; film as philosophy of history; film as an agent of history; and film as history."[1] Using the first paradigm seems to be most fitting when analysing "Argo"[2] - a 2012 historical espionage thriller directed by Ben Affleck. The film depicts the events of 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis and highlights the role of CIA operative Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) during the covert rescue mission. "Argo" goes to the great lengths to present a valid and believable account of the crisis: the real stock footage is either imitated or used in its original form throughout the major scenes of the film; the mise-en-scene (especially costumes) is authentic to the tiniest detail; editor William Goldenberg have even gone so far as to imitate the cinematography techniques used in Hollywood films made during the 70's.[3] Yet "Argo" also contains what Ashkenazi names as one of the shortcomings of this paradigm - the film's commitment to genre-based formulae. The usage of the usual thriller tropes in "Argo" is beyond obvious: from the hero's troubled family life to the climatic ending chase scene, all of the genre-related plot devices are very familiar. Furthermore, a lot of them do not even originate from the depicted historical events, and even barely connect to the film's plot at all - the estrangement between the main character Mendez (Ben Affleck) and his wife and their later reconciliation comes to a mind. However, an

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[1] ASHKENAZI, O. (2013) *The future of history as film: apropos the publication of A Companion to Historical Film* published in *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* [Online] Available from: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13642529.2013.814289#.UqhC1iv4Lvc, [Accessed: 5th December 2013]

[2] The Ben Affleck's film shall be written as "Argo", while the fictional film in the narrative – as 'Argo' from now on.

[3] LYTAL, C. (2012) *On Location: Busy 'Argo' editor turns footage into breathless action* [Online] Available from: http://articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/29/news/la-en-on-location-argo-20121129, [Accessed: 9th December 2013]

argument could be made, that in the case of "Argo" these quite bizarre genre 'trappings' serve not as the shortcomings, but the reinforcements to one of the major themes of the film: the Media (and the historical film) as the deliberately constructed images, that serve a purpose of simplifying and making sense out of the past/ the present. From this perspective "Argo" would actually be best described by a second paradigm - a philosophy of history - as a historical film which reflects on the historification of the given events. "Argo's" genre formulae and certain visual elements provide an underlying meta-narrative, which analyses, how media and historical films - this including - transforms and make sense of the past using various layers of coding (even the very archaic ones). The rest of the essay shall try to support this claim and prove that "Argo", while embracing the 'shortcomings' of the historical film, works very effectively as a historiographical one.

To fully appreciate the importance of the cliché plot devices used in "Argo" one should take a side step and consider a theoretician from a different field of study - a Russian formalist scholar Vladimir Propp (1895-1970). His field of expertise was folklore, for which Propp proposed a new method of analysis: one that is based not on the fairy tales' individual qualities, but rather on the constant, all-common plot devices, that are used regardless of any specific plots.[4] Propp called these devices 'functions' and also implied that the similar systems could be discovered in other forms of literature (epic poetry. etc.). Applying literary theory to the historical film may seem to be a far-fetched approach, yet the sheer number of Propp's functions which are applicable to "Argo" is astounding - furthermore, it explains the reason for some of the thriller genre tropes used in it. The subplot of Mendez's family is a good example.

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[4] PROPP, V. *Fairy Tale Transformations in Readings* in *Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (1968), the University of Michigan, USA, pp. 94-115.

The first time his wife Christine (Taylor Schilling) and son are mentioned, it is only to explain that they are "out in the country" and that Christine needs time to think about their relationship. Throughout the film it is never fully explained why Mendez's family is having troubles - the only implication being that he is not at home enough - and the subplot barely relates to the events of the Iranian crisis. However, its importance becomes clear when applying one of the Propp's functions - the function of the fairy tale 'Princess' character type. According to Propp, 'Princess' is a character the hero throughout the story deserves and, in the end, is rewarded with - in other words, a goal. In case of 'Argo', the hero is Mendez, the 'Princess' - his wife and a son. The notion, that they are the characters Mendez deserves and for whom he is fighting for is reinforced using a close up of a memorial plaque in CIA's headquarters; the plaque reads: "In honour to those members of the Central Intelligence Agency who gave their lives in the service of their country". The close-up's juxtaposition with the couple of tracking shots of Mendez entering the headquarters suggests that the memorial relates to his story; but he has not received his mission yet, thus, he cannot be risking his life in a literal sense. On the other hand, his marital problems were being discussed just the two short scenes ago; thus, the close up implies, that Mendez is risking his *family* life; the reason for the risk is a service to his country, a noble job, which also makes him a hero *deserving* the 'Princess'. In the end of the film the audience witness Mendez reuniting with his family. It hardly make sense plot-wise, as the successful rescue mission did not make his job any less time-consuming nor was the cause of the estrangement removed (he did have marital problems even before embarking on the mission). On the other hand, while applying Propp's 'Wedding' function (a plot device in which hero is rewarded or promoted) the reunion works as an archaic coding; Mendez receives the reward he deserves (during the shot in which he is hugging Christine, audience can see an American flag hanging in the

background; it is an unofficial recognition of the duty to his country done, as the official one is impossible due to the secrecy of Mendez's job) and gets the 'Princess.'

The Proppian plot devices that work independently of the "Argo's" story are noticeable throughout the rest of the film as well. The chase sequence involving Iran Revolutionary Guards and the plane Americans are escaping on abide the 'Pursuit' and the 'Rescue' formulas (though the real life rescue went "very smoothly"),[5] thus creating the required suspense. The obstacles both pursuers and the pursued are facing seem especially incidental and artificial (such as locked doors or an almost-missed phone call), yet the delays are essential components of these formulas and the real-life events could not provide them. The Hollywood characters Lester Siegel (Alan Arkin) and John Chambers (John Goodman) essentially serve as the 'Donors' - archetypical characters from whom hero receives a 'magical agent' which helps them on their quest (in this case: the non-existence production company of a fictional film 'Argo' - an almost literal magic trick designed to fool Iranian authorities) - and who are there to fulfil Propp's 'Receipt of a magical agent' function.

The downplayment of Canadian ambassador Ken Taylor's (Victor Garber) role in the crisis is the aspect of the film that usually receives the most criticism.[6] But it is not a simple bending of the facts; Taylor's character embodies the 'False Hero' function by receiving an undeserved (in the film's plot) rewards while the real hero Mendez is later deservingly recognized by his superior (Bryan Cranston) and the family. The application of Propp's theories show, that the genre formulae, heavily used in the film's rendition of the story, is not even specific to the particular thriller genre and is rather used to create the all-familiar, very

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[5] As cited in JOHNSON, B. D. (2012) *Ben Affleck Rewrites History* [Online] Available from: http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/09/12/ben-affleck-rewrites-history/#more-292541, [Accessed: 2nd December 2013]

[6] JOHNSON, B. D. (2012) *Ben Affleck Rewrites History* [Online] Available from: http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/09/12/ben-affleck-rewrites-history/#more-292541, [Accessed: 2nd December 2013]

archaic narrative structure which does not depend on the narrative itself. The dissonance between the mentioned plot devices and the Iranian crisis story imposes a defamiliarising effect. The closer look at one of the "Argo's" scenes should illustrate how this effect is used to convey film's theme of Media's role in historifying the past.

The scene in question is a lengthy montage during which the reading of the fake film's ('Argo's') script is intercut both with the news reports describing the events of the crisis and the mental torture experienced by the American hostages at the hands of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The first shot of the scene is a tracking shot of the waiter, who, after providing Mendez with the full glass of vine, takes his empty glass back to the kitchen; in there the statement of the Iranian representative is being shown on TV. The usage of the tracking shot highlights the connection between the fake movie (the cliché façade) and the backstage (the covert CIA operation), which is represented by the kitchen. Colours and the sound bridge provide a tonal shift: while the hall in which the reading takes place is brightly lit, the playful soundtrack is used, the cheerful brightness quickly transforms into a more dimly lit kitchen environment; furthermore, the soundtrack looses all of its cheeriness and stays sombre throughout the rest of the montage. It implies that the partying atmosphere in the main hall is just the code which hides the tragedy of the real. The sense of coding becomes increasingly prevalent when the images on TV are juxtaposed with the actors reading the script.

The script of 'Argo' seems to contain every science-fiction cliché it can muster - it particularly copies Star Wars and Flash Gordon, both of them inspired by 'Barsoom' book series by Edgar Rice Burroughs. It is quite interesting that all three of the mentioned stories feature swashbuckling heroes, princesses, etc. - that is, fairytale-like archaic storylines. Therefore, thanks to the familiarity, the shots of the actors reading lines from the 'Argo' may look quite ridiculous if presented on their own, but juxtaposed with the footage of the Iranian

crisis they gain an eerie quality. The stock footage of the US President Carter declaring that "[...] the United States of America will not yield to international terrorism or to blackmail" is immediately followed with the close up of an actor in a robot costume. The robot's lines are: "Sir! We are being crushed! It is not enough time!" The juxtaposition suggests that the Carter's response is as pre-programmed as the robot's voice (even the word 'robot'[7] implies the lack of the free will); the declaration is an empty statement as cliché as any line from the 'Argo's' script. The statement could also be interpreted as a façade with the robot as the truth behind it; Carter's declaration is so cliché and so vague, that it can only be a robotic stock phrase written to hide the helplessness.

The Iranian speech on TV is no different. The Iran's representative expresses that "[United States] and its CIA are the most terrorizing organization of all time." This statement is full of hyperbole, especially the expression "of all time". USA is completely demonized in Iranian's speech, not unlike how Iran was demonized in Carter's - one should note how both of the conflicting parties condemned each other as 'terrorists'. The sort of black-and-white morality used in both of the speeches clearly mirrors the similar one in the childish 'Argo' script - as well as in fairy tales from which it derived. The hyperbole is also fitting, for the fairy tales usually feature larger-than-life villains, the presence of those makes their impending defeat justified. Hence, the montage exposes the Media using the same Proppian functions; by placing the real world events into an archaic narrative structure, news reports present them in a manner which is easy to understand (thanks to its familiarity). Images on TV are nothing more than a code; a code that makes sense out of the senseless tragedy. For behind of all the farce of 'Argo' and the news real lives of real people are at stake - which is shown in the later parts of the montage, in which the captured American diplomats are undergoing the mental torture. Intriguingly, even the torture itself is based on the pre-

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[7] The term 'robot' originates from the Czech word 'rab', which means 'slave.'

conceived familiarity: Iranian Revolutionaries fake the setup of an execution to break their hostages psychologically. The language barrier that may exist between these two groups of people is rendered moot, because the Iranians use the very archetypical, very all-common imagery associated with the execution (blindfolds, final rights, executioner squad) to convey the sense of the impending doom - and then reveal everything to be just a farce. The very real tragedy behind this farce makes both the news on TV and the readings of 'Argo' as eerily uncanny as the fake execution itself.

Thus, the defamiliarising effect the overuse of cliché plot devices featured in the "Argo" serves to convey the idea, that this historical film is coded in a similar fashion. It represents the past events and tries to make sense out of them; historifies, in a way. While exposing the Media's role in historification through the elaborate montage the film becomes an example for its own argument. The Proppian plot devices it uses are so out of the place it is impossible not to notice them; they are as prominent as the clichés as they are in the fake 'Argo' movie and the news reports. Underneath the espionage thriller there is a meta-narrative, via which "Argo" invites the audiences to reflect on the all forms of the historical representation and question their validity - including its own.

The importance of the usage of archaic code to make the real-life events comprehensive is demonstrated not only during the reading montage, but throughout the rest of the film as well. The first shot after the opening narration depicts an Iranian burning an American flag. While that shot is a recreation of the real world photographic image (as one sees during the film's credits), being the first shot of "Argo's" diagesis it serves to establish a notion of Iranians as the enemy. The introduction of heroes and villains certainly makes a story easy to follow, yet it greatly simplifies the conflict of the Iran crisis. Affleck seems to be aware of that, as later in the film the footage of an American burning an Iranian flag is shown: the visual coding device is exposed and deconstructed leaving the viewers with the

sense of both the moral greyness and the understanding of some of the inner workings of the film itself. The first of Ashkenazi's proposed paradigms thus is not quite applicable while analysing "Argo", as even the stock footage and its imitations are used not to reinforce the plot's legitimacy, but to question the very technique of using it. The idea is especially well explored during the opening montage of the film.

"Argo" opens with the short narrated summary of the Iran's history leading to the Hostage Crisis. The montage uses plenty of the stock footage; it does that, however, only to deconstruct its importance. Whilst describing the rumours concerning the Shah wife's "bathing in milk" the shot of the film's storyboard coming to life and becoming a sort of a concept art image is used. Both the comic nature of the image and its genesis from the storyboard implies the rumour to be just a constructed piece of fiction; an exaggerated fairy tale used by the Iranians to demonize Shah's family. Yet the stock footage showing the Shah himself or his successor Imam Khomeini also generates out of the storyboards. The storyboards play a similar role as the kitchen in the reading montage – they are the backstage which is not supposed to be seen, but in which the real work takes place. Exposed storyboarding suggests that the documentary footage may be as constructed as the image of the shah's wife in the milk bath - after all, a choice of how to show something is as important as what to show at all, as the meaning is generated not only through the content, but through the form as well. The storyboards underplay the supposed objectivity of the stock footage. Even the characters of the plot support this idea: while the discussion about the fake film takes place between Mendez, Siegel and Chambers, the news footage from Iran is playing in the background. Its existence as the background for the inception of the fake film itself suggests a connection between the two - that connection is directly addressed by Chambers in the end of the scene. "You ever think, Lester, how this is all for the cameras?" asks he. "Well, they're getting the ratings, I'll say that for", replies Siegel. And they are certainly right: the

images of the angry chanting of Iranian revolutionaries are chosen with the purpose, the same purpose for which the first shot of "Argo's" diagesis is a burning of an American flag - to create a sense of the enemy. Only this time the audience are not just the filmgoers, but the whole world.

The fairy tale structure used in the film demands the existence of a villain; yet the real events do not provide one, as the whole of the Iranian revolution is much too abstract of a concept to represent the direct sense of menace. Thus, quite cleverly, the function of the 'Villain' character in "Argo" is conveyed through the coding as well - more precisely, through the all-present image of Imam Khomeini's gaze. The posters of Khomeini are either lurking in the background or shown on TV screens through the most of the running time of the film - his inescapable, ever-present eyes are following the protagonists wherever they go. Though this type of image is not archetypical, it is a well-known universal sign: the face of Big Brother. In George Orwell's dystopian novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four" Big Brother is a character that does not have a physical presence. He is rather the embodiment of the societies' socio-political system (similarly how Khomeini is an embodiment of Islam in the eyes of the westerners) and symbolizes the surveillance in the novel's fictional country. Although the concept of Big Brother emerged only during the 20th Century, its menacing implications have been engrained so well in the popular culture that the single portrait of the leader of the revolution in "Argo" provides all the villain's characteristics the film needs.

It could be argued though, that the elaborate coding and the exposure of it were not intended by the makers of this film; the lack of mentioning the historiographical themes during the interviews with director Ben Affleck certainly does indicate that. [8] However, the possible lack of intention does not make this particular interpretation of the film invalid -

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[8] CALDWELL, B. (2013) *Making of Argo: Q&A with Ben Affleck* [Online] Available from: http://thebehindthescenes.blogspot.com/2013/05/making-of-argo.html, [Accessed: 9th December 2013]

after all, "Argo" even opens with the deconstruction of the historical documents and their comparison to the storyboarded fiction. The closing scene of the film is notable as well. While the non-diagetic text on screen explains the events after the ones represented in the film's syuzhet, camera slowly pans through the line of toys belonging to Mendez's son. The toys are the various action figures modelled as the characters from the famous science fiction movies - including Star Wars, the major inspiration behind the fictional 'Argo' production. Amongst all the toys the single frame of the storyboard of the 'Argo' itself takes place - it is blurred and only comes into focus during the very last shot of the film. While the opening montage reveals the constructed, fictional nature of the historic truth, the ending sequence serves an opposite purpose - to show, that the document containing a vast historical importance can be revealed through the fiction and amongst the fiction. Furthermore, the sequence symbolizes the importance of coding the said historic truth - in the film the rescue mission's success rested on the archetypical nature of 'Argo's' plot, as the Revolutionary Guards in the airport scenes only started to believe the Americans' cover after recognizing the familiar tropes of the script. The overall presentation of Ben Affleck's "Argo" also works similarly: it does reflect on its own inner workings, but by fitting the Iranian Crisis story into a Proppian structure, it celebrates them, celebrates the comprehensive manner in which the films in general can represent the historic truth. While even the stock footage and historical documents contain a lot of fiction, a fictional work such as both the fake and the real Argo films can have the important historic information coded into them. These ideas are clearly presented in the opening and closing sequences of "Argo", hence, the director's intention is not required to make the said interpretation valid.

"Argo's" commitment to the genre formulae and the usage of the much more archetypical narrative devices does not serve as a shortcoming, but rather as reinforcement of its major themes. Furthermore, it does not only reflect the impossibility of objectively

representing history, but also celebrates the means of the subjective representation through the various layers of coding - presenting itself as an example in both cases and thus creating an underlying meta-narrative. Brian D. Johnson's quite negative article regarding the film ends with these sentences: "As for Argo, it hits theatres Oct. 12, with the tagline: "The mission was real. The movie was fake." But as the spirit of Hollywood fakery comes full circle, the line could refer to Affleck's film." [9] Johnson's remark is truthful, yet it actually highlights "Argo's" strongest point - its historiographical nature.

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[9] JOHNSON, B. D. (2012) *Ben Affleck Rewrites History* [Online] Available from: http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/09/12/ben-affleck-rewrites-history/#more-292541, [Accessed: 2nd December 2013]