

Antique Ruins in Bob Dylan's *Masked and Anonymous* (2003)
Matthew Fox

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accompanying powerpoint presentation of stills from the movie]

How does a civilization fall apart? When a society imprisons dissent, suppresses art and silences music, then it loses its memory and loses its mind.* When the paramount forms of technological power are mass media and military force, and the violence of the latter becomes the broadcast content of the former,* then a vortex of chaos will have commenced that cannot but unravel the entire unsound edifice.* These seem to be the simple take-home lessons of the 2003 movie *Masked and Anonymous*.

Filmed in downtown L.A. but set sometime hence, *Masked and Anonymous* portrays a North American empire,* stretching from Canada to the Yucatan Peninsula, ruled by a military dictator going by the title of President,* in the midst of an open revolution, a full-blown civil war.* * Gangs seem to run the streets, co-opted as the armed street forces for this post-democratic police state.* Homelessness seems to be the norm* * and social relations are adrift in the wreckage of this fractiously multiethnic, multi-religious empire.* * [Pause at Midas Judas Building]

The movie was the brainchild of Bob Dylan and television screenwriter Larry Charles, who co-wrote and directed it. Though trashed by most film critics, the picture is a major artistic statement from one of the 20th century's biggest music figures (with an all-star cast to boot). It engages in very smart and allusive dialogue with the three major strands informing Western civilization. It appeals to Roman history, Greek tragedy and

ethos, and to the Biblical tradition. I will discuss the film's different strategic use of each of these three strands. * [Move to Uncle Sweetheart]

There's going to be a benefit concert, broadcast on the government controlled Network, "to help the real victims of this revolution," says Uncle Sweetheart, the fat, pompous concert promoter, played by John Goodman, who is also an amateur student of history. He tends to read the present through the past and his favorite paradigm is the waning days of the Roman Empire. The movie opens in his office, where two thugs are demanding money from him.* "The Dark Lords" he says, "The Democrats and Republicans, working for a barbarian who can scarcely spell his own name." * (They promptly punctuate their point with a swift and severe beating.)* Again at the end of the film,* he tells Pagan Lace (played by Penelope Cruz), "We are living in a tawdry and vulgar age....You know, when the Roman Empire fell, you know what Caesar and the rest of them Romans were doing when the barbarians was at the gate?...They were shooting craps and gambling." (This messed up historical reference betrays contamination from Uncle Sweetheart's other great informing tradition: the American Blues.)* [Unc. Sw. taking a shot of whiskey]

Throughout the film the paradigms of history are fractured.* They can't break through the chaotic polysemy of mass culture.* Civilization has choked on its own significations. The plethora of signs has turned into an absence of meaning and a legally enforced amnesia.* Great historical individuals have all been leveled by the trivializing processes of entertainment. The circus side-show acts that Uncle Sweetheart brings in for the concert include a ventriloquist, a fortune-teller, Abe Lincoln, Gandhi and Pope "John Paul Deuce" as he calls him.* History is lost in the homeless drift of hollow signifiers.

When the ailing president dies at the end, the new president (played by Mickey Rourke) broadcasts his plans for the new regime,* a broadcast that blocks out the benefit concert which is just then beginning.* He also appeals to Roman Imperial practice as the answer to social ills.* “At the moment we are giving people a new identity and erasing the collective memory,” he says. “We are rewriting the history books. Nothing was more important to our president than bringing peace to this war-torn country. Peace, a lasting peace, that can only be achieved through strength....There will be no more violence from the organized media. Real actual violence will take the place of manufactured violence. We will empty the prisons and we will fill the football stadiums,* and the evildoers from the prisons will be trampled by wild elephants, mauled by uncaged bears, pecked to death by screaming eagles.”

The film’s Biblical references function to emphasize this brokenness, intensifying the sense of a broken moral-religious canon.* After a lethally violent confrontation with the counter-revolutionaries, the bus driver says:* “They have no ideology, they push both Jesus and Judas aside.” A long diatribe by a strange evangelical radio preacher during the opening credits, which I have put on the handout [#1], serves to frame the whole film with this feeling of religious desolation. “I’d swear on the bible—a book of treachery and murder and genocide....God has turned his back on this nation,” he cries. The only religious practitioner in the film is the journalist’s Latina girlfriend Pagan Lace,* who is devoted to profuse syncretic Latin American religious forms* and is constantly crossing herself and muttering prayers.* * In a fantastic scene with a wild-eyed John the Baptist like figure played by Val Kilmer,* we get a contrast between the sacrificial practices of ancient religions and New World empires. [#2 on the handout]. In this world of corporate

human sacrifice—recalling Allen Ginsberg’s reuse of the biblical Moloch as an allegory of the modern machine’s cannibalism—the broken religious traditions provide no sound moral compass or existential grounding.*

The hero of this tragedy of a broken history is Jack Fate,* the fallen son of the dying president. He’s been locked away in a crowded dungeon,* but gets sprung for the benefit concert. The film’s allusions to the Greek tradition are mostly activated through Jack’s drama of journeying from jail to the capitol for the concert. Tragedy, both Greek and Shakespearian, is the generic model that frames Jack like a pair of cold iron shackles. Themes from Hamlet are often struck, but that is another talk.* Greek tragedy’s governing theme of chance and fate (*tuche* and *moira*) are evoked in the hero’s very name, Jack Fate.* Just sprung from prison, Jack meets at the bus stop Prospero (played by Cheech Marin).* “Hey, you missed it,” he says in that bemused stoner voice of his, “two eagles just killed a pregnant rabbit.” This quotes directly the chorus from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* [on the handout #3]. “Hmm. Rabbit must have done something,” says Jack in a deadpan. “Leaving town?” Prospero asks. “By choice this time?” “Not really.” says Jack. “Nothing ever really is.” * Like Agamemnon in Aeschylus’ play, Jack is apparently slipping his neck in the noose of fate.* [on the bus]

Like the Greek tragic hero,* Jack’s fate involves the tortured family drama of the ruling house.* * We discover through several flashbacks that Jack’s fall from grace* has been the result of his sleeping with his father’s mistress (played by Angela Bassett).* His mother—who never loved him, he says—is dead, as is his mysterious brother Edward, about whom we only learn that he went on a hunting trip and never came back. In the voice-over of one of these flashbacks,* Jack articulates a distinctly Greek

ethos about virtue and happiness:* “Some of us pursue perfection and virtue, and if we’re lucky we catch up to it. But happiness can’t be pursued. It either comes to your or it don’t....” This calls to mind the Greek dictum, call no man happy until he’s dead.* He then closes with a gnomic enigma that evokes Odysseus at his moment of vengeance: “In the end, it’s the strongest arm that stretches the bow.” [falling down stairs]

Perhaps the strongest underlying Greek tragic model is Dionysos *a la* Euripides’ *Bacchae*. One strong indication that we are meant to think of the disturbing god of freedom and madness is Jack’s eternally young Dionysian doppelganger,* Bobby Cupid (played by Luke Wilson). When Jack gets to the concert site he rings up* this *puer aeternus* in an alligator-skin jacket out of his past to come to the show.* Bobby and Jack together I read as a Janus-faced Dionysos figure,* like whom they represent the dangerous but vital social forces of art, music, and individual creativity, which those in power are anxious about, anxiety that manifests itself in hostility, dismissiveness, feigned indifference, mockery and derision. “Jack Fate ain’t a big star,” says the president-to-be. “Jack Fate’s a nobody,” says a fuming Network Executive, “he was over before he started.”

But Jack the rock star wash-up is also an enigma, his stone-cold face is mask-like, concealing a strange and powerful charisma that comes out when he plays his guitar and sings.* And it’s true. The film’s self-reflexive conceit about Bob Dylan is borne out in the performances that punctuate the film. So too, Dylan’s own real worldwide musical influence is borne out by the soundtrack of Bob Dylan covers from around the world: cover versions of his songs in Japanese, Italian hip-hop, Israeli pop, snarling punk. Like Dionysos’ in his world-wide conquest.* At the center of this film, Jack and his band play

“Dixie,” evoking the old forgotten America, the old South, and by metonymy the power of memory and history, countering the theme of forgetting and enforced loss of memory [play scene]: “I wish I was in the land of cotton, old times there are not forgotten, Look away, look away, look away, Dixieland.”

As with Pentheus’ repressive regime in the *Bacchae*, the political world of *Masked and Anonymous* is one of legalistic compulsion,* a police state that places more value on machine guns than art, which it represses, conceals, imprisons.* The constant content of the network media is violence,* and the only message approved by the network for the concert is the false hope of prisoner solidarity and the fully contained sentiments of the 1960s counterculture.* The approved set list includes “Jailhouse Rock,” the Beatles’ “Revolution,” “Cellblock Number Nine,” CSN’s “Ohio.” That Jack is unpredictable and threatens not to play by their rules is the network’s constant fear.* This fear leads the network and the government thugs in the end to collude in charging Jack with a murder and carting him back to jail where he can—so they believe—be controlled.* * But his voice-over as he is driven away suggests several Dionysian insights, which also happen to have Buddhist resonance as well—insights of constant and inevitable transformation: * “Things fall apart. Especially all the neat order of rules and laws.” Of the multiplicity of truth: * “The way you look at things is the way you really are. See it from a fair garden and everything looks cheerful. * Climb to a higher plateau and you’ll see plunder and murder. Truth and beauty are in the eye of the beholder.” Of an important irrational dimension in life: * “Sometimes it’s not enough to know the meaning of things. Sometimes you have to know what things don’t mean as well....* I stopped trying to figure everything out a long time ago.”

In conclusion, *Masked and Anonymous*, like all great art, stirs up the depths of traditional symbols, genres, and concepts as it reflects upon modern realities and meanings, in order to sketch, in this case, a moving postmodern tapestry of tortured culture and crumbling forms. The legacies of Rome, Greece, Judaism and Christianity inform but don't control this world, which is indeed our own world, just refracted through a Dylanesque surrealist prism. Bearing the stamp of its maker, the film offers no easy answers, if it offers answers at all. But it does beckon us to take a hard look in the mirror of a world spinning into historically unprecedented levels of chaotic complexity. And for that, it is relevant, significant, and—coming from a “washed-up rock star”—surprisingly contemporary. Thank you.