

## The Golden Fleece Redux

A review of the film



**Argo**

(2012)

Ben Affleck (Director)

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Reviewed by

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*Argo* is an action thriller despite the viewer's knowing how the movie will end before it begins. Set in Iran when the U.S. embassy was seized after the fall of the shah in 1978–1979, *Argo* is the story of how six embassy employees, who avoided being taken hostage, are spirited out of the country. The film showcases many aspects of human nature, both good and bad.

The title, *Argo*, ostensibly refers to a bad science fiction fantasy film that provides the vehicle for the escape; it serves as an excellent metaphor. The mythological Jason, who sailed the *Argo* in his search for the Golden Fleece, was saved from infanticide at birth by his mother, Alcimedes, who smuggled him out of Thessaly by pretending he was stillborn, faking his burial, and entrusting him to be raised by a centaur in another kingdom. So the modern-day hero, Tony Menendez (Affleck) uses the myth of one who has been rescued to stage a new rescue in 1979.

The movie focuses on the way in which people engage in repetition, thought by Freud to be an effort at mastery (Freud, 1920/1955a), or the concept that until we learn from

history, we are doomed to repeat it (Santayana, 1905). The images of angry Iranians demonstrating against the policies of the United States are as omnipresent in the news media today as they were in 1979. The anger against what is viewed as U.S. hegemony has now escalated, exacerbated by the U.S. embargo against Iran and the invasion of Iraq.

The scenes of irate Iranians storming the gates of the U.S. embassy are illustrative of the groupthink that can supersede the values of any individual (Freud, 1921/1955b). These images are universal, interchangeable with pictures of mob violence anywhere, whether in the United States or abroad. However, the film fails to highlight this universality, stereotyping the Iranian people as rioting jihadists, never suggesting that mob behavior is endemic to all nationalities once a certain boiling point is reached.

*Argo* offers a false binary: America is good, and Iran is bad. There is a regressive comfort in returning to this earlier level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1981), freeing oneself from nuance and shadow. The movie may betray the director's well-known liberal political leanings, showing U.S. government officials as mired in politics, unable to defend the U.S. embassy because they have denied the inherent vulnerability of the building and willing to sacrifice the lives of the hostages for political expediency. This creates another binary: that the establishment government is bad and individual initiative is good.

*Argo* perpetrates the misconception that in order to be successful or to survive, one must fail to obey orders. The six U.S. embassy employees who escape have ignored the order to remain at the embassy as it was being seized. The rescue mission is a success because the protagonist, CIA agent Tony Menendez, ignores the order to abort his mission.

Although these actions are factual, they are portrayed in a way that privileges the American ideal of rugged individualism. The embassy employees are portrayed as being pushed out of their ethic of compliance by the clarity that inaction will lead to danger. Affleck as Menendez seems to walk a thin line between healthy self-esteem and grandiosity, the belief that he never fails. Yet, his final act of disobedience, not aborting the mission, is painted as rooted in his concern for the safety of the hostages rather than for his own safety.

The other group that is both revered and reviled is the Hollywood movie industry. It is ridiculed for its arrogance and revered for its patriotism. Again, a small group harnesses the resources of the entertainment industry to create an illusion that allows the successful escape. One stereotype that is without borders is the fascination with filmmaking, as enticing to the Iranians as to any Westerners. Another stereotype is of filmmakers who defy rules and reason to capture the perfect scene.

In the end, *Argo* is a tremendously entertaining action film that both glorifies and bashes. While not very deep or psychologically complex, *Argo* manages to tell a story of bravery while taking subtle pokes at aspects of human nature. On the surface, the movie is reductionistic: U.S. democracy is good, and the Iranian theist state is evil. Yet beneath the surface, the viewer may be entertained by the way that human foibles are shown to work for the good of others. How often in our times do rescue stories have happy endings?

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## References

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