

## **The Flesh of a Meta-Character or Why Hollywood Invented Denzel Washington**

*Dr. Ivana Uspenski\**

University of Arts Belgrade, Serbia

In this paper I will introduce the concept of a metacharacter which has from the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century become a dominant model in building Hollywood's film narratives, helping them grow into legends of our time, a memory not easily distinguished from the reality.

A metacharacter is an evolutionary construct or the abstratized entity accounting for the unified sum of all the film roles a respective actor has played. It is a liminal being which exists between fiction and reality, fine-balancing its life on and off screen. Once a character gets depicted on-screen, its life does not end once the film's theatric life-span is over. When the curtains are down it keeps residing as a discursive flow surrounding an actor depicting it. It is a flux which develops and grows waiting for its next point of actualization. Every next role thusly is just one of the numerous possible intersections of the flux, its momentary evolutionary state. While off-screen the metacharacter flow becomes inseparable from the actor him/herself. It is not only because the character played influences the personal life of the actor, but moreover because the character played becomes the extension of the private life. The metacharacter arises only once the on-screen character can be understood as a natural extension of the actor's off-screen presence. This liminality between film and reality, between a dream and vigilance where every state is conditioned by the other makes the metacharacter a superior being bearing mythic power. It has a multipersonal semantics, but the ontology of oneness. It is at the same time a being and a narrative and this twofold nature is used by the industry of entertainment to promote and idolize its own causes.

Let us introduce the example of Denzel Washington and the evolution of its metacharacter: from a sergeant Nicholas Styles in *The Ricochet*, Malcolm X, Rubin Carter in *The Hurricane* to major Ben Marco in *The Manchurian Candidate* and Eli in *The Book of Eli*. A metacharacter Hollywood grew out of Washington is none of the formerly mentioned characters. It is all of them at the same time. It is the construct evolved not from a role of a sergeant to the one of the last prophet, but a persona which has by fighting for justice actually travelled the road from the legendary boxer to the savior of human faith. This development has been as real as Washington's own personal upbringing: from the modest origins in Harlem to the Oscar-winning hero. His very growing up, as well as patriotic semantics of his name is inseparable part of Washington's metacharacter. His own personal life odyssey becomes therefore the trait not of the way he portrays Eli but the trait of Eli as he is.

A metacharacter is thusly a potentiality of unified narratives existing as a discursive flow of power being actualized, as per hegemonic need either in the form of a film character or a personal life story of the actor depicting it.