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Understanding Karpman’s Triangle

and Its Illustration in Film Noir

Film noir is a genre of film that originated in the 1940s. Film noir films usually contain elements such as a dark tone, narrative of crime thriller with voice over and flashbacks, high contrast, black-and-white, etc. All of the above elements combine to serve a better purpose of illustrating the complex relationship between an antihero, a detective, and a femme fatale - a beautiful yet duplicitous woman who seduces and traps the antihero. This relationship varies from film to film, but it always keeps a pattern - the Karpman Drama Triangle.

The Karpman Drama Triangle, also known as the Victim Triangle, involves three roles: the innocent victim, the noble hero, and the evil villain. Sometimes, the victim plays the hero simultaneously; sometimes, he can play the villain too. In other words, the antihero protagonist can be the detective or the murderer at the same time.

I think of the Drama Triangle as a strange kind of merry-go-round, which starts when one person takes on the role of a victim or persecutor. This person then feels the need to enlist other players into the conflict. We need one person on each seat in this drama. However, the roles can switch at any moment; the victim might turn on the rescuer, the rescuer then switches to persecuting. Usually, for the drama to play out, each person will occupy all three positions at least once(*Mackie*).

As *Mackie* writes, the roles are interchangeable within the Karpman Drama Triangle. For example, in the 1950 B movie noir film *D.O.A.* by *Rudolph Maté*, and its 2021 modern neo-noir remake *Kate* by *Cedric Nicolas-Troyan*, the protagonist is poisoned to death. He has to find out the truth and take revenge within his final days of life. D.O.A. stands for death on arrival, a term used in hospitals to describe patients who arrive dead. The title is ironic because the protagonist is like a living dead before being poisoned and turns into an actual dying man afterward, significantly different from his previous self if nothing happened. In *D.O.A.* and *Kate*, the protagonist is an innocent victim since he is poisoned unconsciously and can do nothing but accept his pending death. However, he then turns into a detective and a rescuer for himself, doing everything he can as quickly as possible to look for the truth and take revenge before his death. The villain for the two films is relatively obvious - whoever poisons the protagonist for his own good. In *D.O.A.*, Halliday murders Eugene Phillips and poisons the protagonist Bigelow because Phillips has discovered his iridium affair and he fears that Bigelow also knows, killing two people for his own good, especially when the protagonist is innocent and knows nothing.

In the 1946 classic film noir film *The Killers*, directed by *Robert Siodmak*, the Karpman Drama Triangle plays out slightly differently. While the detective is someone else, double-crossed by his fellow gang members and eventually the femme fatale Kitty, the protagonist is the undoubted victim. He might as well be a villain as he for the payroll robbery he once committed with the gang. However, he deserves to be a hero and rescuer for himself through his heroic refusal to flee and his heroic resolution to sacrifice his life in order to compensate for his sin when the killers come for him:

On the surface the Rescuers/Hero Leaders want to solve problems. They make great efforts to do so, but frequently there is a hidden motive to not succeed, or to succeed in a way which benefits their ego...Charismatic or hero-type leaders cover up their own anxieties by placing the focus on those they are rescuing. By doing this, they boost their self-esteem, receive respected rescue status and get pleasure from being depended upon (*Mackie*).

As *Mackie* mentions, the rescuer or hero does not always solve problems for good. Sometimes they “boost their self-esteem” by doing it. For example, in the 1946 classic film noir film *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, directed by *Tay Garnett*, the detective or the rescuer hero is the district attorney Kyle Sackett. He did the investigation for his esteem and his bet with Arthur Keats instead of the common good. The protagonist, on the other hand, is the villain for his murder of Nick Smith. He is also the victim, heavily trapped and seduced by the femme fatale and ready to face the deserved consequences in the end.

The victim heroes in film noir films most likely switch positions from a victim to a rescuer or a hero. They want to solve the problems that they are involved in or problems that they cause. They often make a great effort to do so no matter the cost because they have nothing to lose. Sometimes they also switch to villains. The Karpman Drama Triangle adequately explains the logic behind these characters, their respective, potentially switching roles, and what causes their decisions.

Additionally, all of the films mentioned- *D.O.A., Kate, The Killers, The Postman Always Rings Twice* - use flashbacks to tell the story. It helps create thrillers and suspense for the audience, making the somehow cliche story more appealing to the audience. They all used high contrast and close lens for the characters on a frequent basis, which help intensify the character interactions, their psychological struggles, and the ultimate switch within the Karpman Drama Triangle.

The Karpman Drama Triangle not only exists in film noirs but also in real life. In fact, it emerges from everyone’s daily life. Studying the Karpman Drama Triangle not only helps you understand the psychological foundations of conflicts of all scales but also helps you stay fresh and think about the question outside of the box. “It can also help you in your everyday interactions, as you learn to recognize when someone is attempting to pull you into a triangle”(*Wheitner*). While each role plays a part of the triangle with a limited perspective, together, they provide a holistic view of the problem. Being able to identify the triangle allows people to find a better approach to the situation and a better resolution to the conflict.

Work Cited

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[3] Associates, Harper and. “Conflict Drama: Victim, Villain or Hero?” *Harper & Associates - The Joy of Conflict Resolution*, http://www.joyofconflict.com/editor\_articles/ConflictDrama-VictimVillainHero.htm.