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Restoring the Past, Forging the Present: Scapegoating and Redemption in *Calvaire* and *These Are The Names*

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Abstract: This article is a comparison of two works of fiction, a film and a novel, that both address the question of how people deal with intense memories of tragic events from their past. Both works are characterized by crucial references to religious phenomena. In the Belgian cult horror film *Calvaire* and the bestselling Dutch novel *These Are The Names*, stories are told about the desire to restore what was lost. In order to deal with past realities, the characters in these works of fiction impose the past, in an imaginative form, upon the present, which inevitably seems to create violence and conflict. The introduction of violence, and the way this violence destroys identities as a means to restore a lost world, calls the possibility and credibility of restoration into question. In order to explore the phenomenon of restoration, we introduce a concept of substitution (inspired by René Girard) to investigate the power of violence in these two narratives. In *Calvaire*, violence leads to the perversion of identity, ultimately leading to the latter's destruction, yet at the same time it can be understood to result in love and absolution. In *These Are The Names*, sacrificing acts first seem to bring a new beginning but in the end redemption is substituted by accusations of severe crimes. However, in this novel the past is also present in such a way that lost identities could be restored. How both stories look at the relation between past and present and in which way they present the possibility of restoring painful events, will be our main questions.

Keywords: fiction; film; novel; René Girard; scapegoat mechanism; violence; identity; redemption



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1. Introduction

Calvaire (Du Welz 2004), is a horror film in which a passer-by (Marc Stevens) is forced by the men of a remote Ardennes community to take up the role of a lost wife and lover. In the novel *These Are The Names* (Wieringa 2015), a chief of police (Pontus Beg) is confronted with a group of refugees who have killed one of their group members. While Beg is busy reflecting on the possibility to regain his Jewish identity, the refugees start to worship their murdered fellow traveler and are thus creating a common past. Although the two works are quite different in form, genre, and style, we were intrigued by similarities regarding the plot of substitution, the use of violence, the desire for redemption, and the question of coping with the past in the present. These themes inspired us to look at both works through the lens of René Girard's idea of the scapegoat mechanism. This concept allows us to compare two rather different stories and explore the relation of outsider/group and the way this dynamic plays out in the dealing with tragic past events. In both works, we see outsiders who—through their acting and suffering—become mediators between the past and the present. In this mediation through sacrifice, the stories acquire an existential, even religious, dimension, albeit in rather different and unexpected ways¹.

Calvaire and *These Are The Names* show options of how people can deal with past events of a tragic nature. How do these stories accomplish that? We start from the idea that fiction—as told in literature and film—can convey valuable insights regarding human

life (Koster 2011). We are not exactly the first academics who think this is possible. In recent decades, several scholars have argued that the products of the imagination have evolutionary benefits (e.g., Bloom 2010; Gottschall 2012). Brian Boyd writes that art, and in particular fiction, has played a key role in the ability to rise above the here and now—enhancing our ability to make the right choices and share our attention with others. Fictional stories enable us to imagine different scenarios and to determine which scenario has the best credentials. In this way, according to Boyd, fiction helps us to gain insight into actual reality at a low cost (Boyd 2009, pp. 49, 81, 192, 193).

However, the latter is not self-evident. Because why should fictional stories shed light on our non-fictional reality, on our real life experiences? Aristotle was one of the first to think about this question. Reflecting on the difference between a historian and a tragedy writer, he claims that a historian describes what happened, focusing on the particular and the individual, while a tragedy writer writes down what could happen in general (Aristotle 1986). The latter has the freedom to shape or even manipulate the facts, and to compose a believable story with characters spectators can identify with (Aristotle 1986, p. 1451b). In tragedies, but also in contemporary literature and film, unique constellations of situations, events, and persons do occur, but the way in which they are presented is recognizable and obeys what (with Aristotle) can be called rules of thumb regarding plausibility and inevitability. Martha Nussbaum, who pioneered the interface of philosophy and literature, puts it this way (Nussbaum 1990, p. 95): “... novels, as a genre, direct us to attend to the concrete, they display before us a wealth of richly realized detail, presented as relevant for choice. And yet they speak to us: they ask us to imagine possible relations between our own situations and those of the protagonists, to identify with the characters and/or the situation, thereby perceiving those similarities and differences.”

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur paid special attention to the way in which stories can actually change our attitude and way of life. According to Ricoeur, fictional stories refer to reality in a “productive” way: thanks to the power of imagination, such stories design a possible world that can “rewrite” or “refigure” our reality (Ricoeur 1979; Ricoeur 1985). He speaks about a gap between fiction and life, but his thoughts on the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader are meant to show that this gap can be bridged (Ricoeur 1991, pp. 25–27). According to Ricoeur, the composition of a text is not completed by the author, but by the reader. From a hermeneutical point of view, the appropriation of a (narrative) text by the reader is understood as a process in which the actors, events, and actions of the world of the text are considered a horizon of possible experience. Refiguration is possible because “the reader belongs at once to the work’s horizon of experience in imagination and to that of his own real action.” (Ricoeur 1991, p. 26).

With Aristotle, Ricoeur, and Nussbaum we argue that films like *Calvaire* and novels such as *These Are The Names* can change one’s own way of dealing with tragic memories. These works of fiction succeed in achieving this aim by depicting a specific story in a compelling and penetrating way. Because viewers and readers sympathize from within, as it were, with Marc Stevens and Pontus Beg, they are confronted in a characteristic way with moral dilemmas, moving situations and existential choices. Shocked and moved by these fascinating fictional stories, our empathy is stretched, our powers of judgment sharpened, and perhaps a new answer to the question of what it means to be human emerges. In short, through the operation of the imagination, fictional stories offer us new points of view and can provide us with insights into our own reality and eventually set us in motion to transform that reality.

In the following sections, we will look at how in both stories the past turns up in the present, and what the consequences are of afflicting memories. We argue that in *Calvaire* and *These Are The Names*, three different kinds of restoration of the past are presented. To analyze these representations, we look at Girard’s theory of the scapegoat mechanism. In two of them, violence plays a central role: in the first, an imposed identity transformation leads to jealousy and destruction; in the second, a murder, interpreted as sacrifice, becomes

the object of a shared identity. These two forms of restoration are ultimately doomed to fail: they are illusionary efforts to cope with tragic events from the past. In no way do they contribute to the aim of redemption. The third form, however, is in fact an imaginative and (re)constructive quest into the past, which leads to a new beginning. Thus, we will demonstrate how the two works of fiction can be seen as different readings of Girard's main theory.

2. Calvaire

The protagonist of *Calvaire* (a title with religious connotations, as we will see), Marc Stevens, is a traveling artist who sings light music of the nostalgic kind. We see him performing in a home for elderly. The inhabitants and their caretakers have a more than ordinary interest in the singer and some intrude themselves upon him. It is the end of December. After this show, Marc will move south for another performance. When the night falls, he gets lost in the woods and his van breaks down. Marc meets Boris, who is looking for his dog Bella. Boris takes the entertainer to the hostel of Bartel, where the singer finds shelter. The next day, Bartel looks whether he can fix the van, while Marc explores the surroundings of the hostel. During his walk, he spies on a group of locals who are having sex with a calf.² That night, Bartel talks about his lost wife Gloria and asks Marc to sing something for him. In the morning, it becomes clear that Bartel has no intention of helping his guest. It appears that the hostel owner takes Marc for Gloria. Bartel wrecks the van and sets it on fire. "Gloria" is not supposed to leave again. After knocking him down and leaving him unconscious, Bartel ties Marc up, puts him in a dress, and shaves his head. Bartel hopes that by making him ugly the other villagers will not notice him.

From Bartel's point of view, "Gloria" has returned and she is supposed to share his bed. The next day Marc tries to escape but he gets trapped in a rabbit snare. To punish him for his attempt to escape, Bartel nails the singer to a cross-shaped wood construction in the stables. His fear that others would notice "Gloria" became true. The local inhabitants, among whom are the men who Marc saw practicing bestial acts, are interested in him. Just like Bartel, they see the singer as the returned Gloria. The leader of the men, named Robert, even claims "Gloria" to be his wife. During Christmas diner in the hostel, the locals raid the company of Boris, Bartel, and Marc. Robert asks "Gloria" why he has returned and commands him to sing, but Marc denies that he is Gloria. According to the men, the disobedient "Gloria" needs to be punished and one of the men tries to rape him. Marc manages to escape however, and the men start to pursue him. The landscape transforms into a marsh and at a certain point Robert decides to go after "Gloria" on his own. When Robert has moved in on Marc, he falls in a pit of mud and slowly starts to sink. He calls out to the singer and asks again, in despair, why he has returned. "You loved me, didn't you?! he adds. "Say it!" Marc kneels near the mud pit and while Robert sinks down he tells him that he, "Gloria", loved him.

2.1. Metamorphosis and Violence

The film is characterized by transgressions of an uncomfortable kind. After the gig in the home for elderly, one of Marc Stevens' female fans meets him in the dressing room and puts his hand on her crotch. The transgressions culminate in Marc's forced crossdressing at the hands of his newfound husband, Bartel. It is in this uneasy metamorphosis that a deeper understanding of the film is revealed. Already in the beginning scene, we see how Marc puts on make up before the show. He becomes somebody else, a performer, a singer who enacts profound feelings. He is the artist who makes the elderly long for love. As a singer, he embodies this longing, but it is a longing that transcends the play between performer and audience. It is no longer a performance of nostalgia, which we all know only lasts for a while. The nostalgia Marc has stirred becomes an enduring enchantment. This is clear in the touch of the elderly woman, as mentioned above. The singer is wanted for the consolation of romance he has brought. This determines the continuation of the story. Marc will be constantly subjected to the projection of others who want to possess

him and disown his identity. The threat of this projection is immediately felt when we understand that the singer is never just “an image of desire” but that his performance is an invitation to transgress his body. The incident in the dressing room is only foreshadowing what will happen later, with the crucial difference that he will then be forced by others to perform somebody else.

As a singer, he remains emotionally detached and he seems to be too apathetic to be able to resist the violations against his person (Paszyk 2009, p. 211). This is continued in Marc’s interaction with Bartel. By gradually accepting the role of Gloria, he ceases to be himself. Thus, Marc becomes Gloria, the loved one who is able to offer comfort and restore what was lost. This restoration should be understood as an attempt to repair the order between husband and wife, Bartel and Gloria. The trouble is, however, that this order is contested because the men of the village also want Gloria. They desire what Bartel desires; what frustrates Bartel, frustrates them; without any explanation or doubt, they take Marc for Gloria. Alive she can fulfill the role of wife or mistress, but dead, she can have meaning as the woman who needs punishment for walking away from her man. By killing her, the men will take complete possession of her.

The idolization of Marc, turning the make-believe of his performance into something real, a nonconsensual touch, is a prelude of how he will become a substitute for Bartel and the other men.³ We see how Marc Stevens transforms into “Gloria”, the woman who disappeared and now has returned. Emotional and physical terror play an essential role in this transformation. This reminds us of the idea of torture as a way to terminate the reality of the victim and change it into the reality of the torturer (Scarry 1985, pp. 28–37). *Calvaire* thus tells the story of people attempting to restore a sad and irreversible life event by creating another (violent) event. To our mind, the violent excesses in *Calvaire* cannot be separated from a deep truth: the impossibility of reversing the tragic facts of life.

2.2. The Illusion of Redemption

Despite Marc Stevens’ continued resistance, he finally surrenders to his role of Gloria. “I loved you.” With these words, he lets Robert’s delusions reign over him and he becomes the one that others want him to be. Marc thus betrays himself and gives love to the man who had nothing good in store for him. Although this is the moment Robert is unable to exercise physical power over Marc, the singer chooses to offer him consolation. This act can be considered as an act of forgiveness for the fact that Robert tried to take away his identity. Paradoxically, Marc absolves Robert and he thus fully takes on the identity of Gloria. Therefore the ambiguous title of the film *Calvaire*, literally “ordeal” as well as Golgotha (Latin: calvaria), gets more depth than the allusions to the Passion of Jesus of Nazareth indicate (cf. Sylow n.d.).⁴ In this priestly role and replacement of Gloria, Marc shows the characteristics of a redeemer (Lamkin 2006; Versteeg 2009). Marc is a substitute who is punished for the disappearance of Gloria, but this is only effective because the men deny the identity of the victim, disowning Marc and restoring “Gloria”, in order to kill her. Even when the roles seem to have reversed and Robert asks Marc to say he loves him, it is the victim who submits to his new role, at a moment in which he has the choice to escape.⁵

Calvaire shows an image of how identities are redeemed, but it is not an image of hope. Redemption is created by forcing somebody to become a savior. The savior is forged out of the desire of others. To become a savior, the victim’s identity is perverted and transformed until he completely coincides with what others want him to be. In *Calvaire*, redemption and restoration of the past are illusions at best. The impossibility of the return of the beloved is not accepted and therefore the event is violently created. The illusion of redemption does not only mask the continuation of violence, oppression, and disownment, but it masks primarily that this illusion itself is inherently violent.

Watching *Calvaire*, we hear echoes from René Girard’s idea of the scapegoat, the outsider who is being punished to restore harmony (Girard 1986). Scapegoating is a mechanism that operates through a process of stereotypes. First, a group experiences a crisis. Second, there are crimes that threaten the social order. Third, a victim is blamed for

the crimes. Fourth and finally, the victim is disciplined with violent sanctions (Girard 1986, pp. 12–24). From Girard's perspective, redemption through the scapegoat is essentially an illusion because it unavoidably results in violence and murder. According to Girard, this represents the crucial dynamics of religion. However, in the sacrifice of Christ, Girard argues that this dynamic force is broken down: by Christ's innocent self-sacrifice, he has exposed and revealed the scapegoat mechanism. Through this act, people can no longer believe in a guilty scapegoat and they are enabled to take up responsibility for their own guilt. In the film, however, we think that the scapegoat mechanism is in full operation: there was a crisis as two men competed for the same woman, the woman herself was blamed for this, thus becoming the victim and, finally, being expelled. Gloria is the one who took the blame of the men. Perhaps she is dead, and perhaps the men killed her. The story does not tell. However, with Marc's arrival, this whole process repeats itself: it is the arrival of Marc that causes crisis, and it is the violent transformation of the singer that enhances it, resulting, first, in envious violence among the men themselves, leading to the hunt for "Gloria". The urge to punish her and reinstate her as wife and mistress are so strong that the lost singer Marc Stevens is eagerly taken to be Gloria. Although he obviously is a substitute, it is clear that the men do not see him as such. To their mind, Marc is Gloria; and now that she has returned, she immediately becomes an object of desire and conflict once again. Thus, he becomes the perfect scapegoat masking the illusion of the villagers, being forced to play his role to the very end. Every attempt to stick to his own identity is used against him and seen as the disobedience of the returned wife who needs more disciplining. In the final stage, the victim almost resembles Christ completely when he expresses "love" to the one who persecutes him, but we, as viewers, are not sure whether this is the final surrender to the reality of the villagers or that Marc manages to keep his integrity because he offers consolation out of his own free will.

Calvaire can thus be seen as a comment on Girard's scapegoat theory. In *Calvaire*, the scapegoat is the substitute, the one who is forced to replace the absent person, who was herself a scapegoat. In this context, the victim confronts us with the absent space that the lost loved one has left behind, an absence that has to be filled with illusion and parody. Becoming aware of this substitution means facing the reality of absence and understanding how our desire projects itself violently onto others. However, for the characters in the film, this awareness seems to be no option and therefore redemption fails. They simply copy the past in order to restore the present. Only the viewer is able to see the terrifying absurdity of the situation.

In *Calvaire*, violence thus leads to the perversion of identity and to a failure of coping with tragic events from the past. Moreover, redemption seems to be totally out of reach. In *These Are The Names*, a more promising approach to the relation between past and present and to the possibility of a kind of redemption is presented.

3. These Are The Names

In *These Are The Names*, two story lines come together. First, the story of Pontus Beg is told. Beg is a police governor in Michailopol, a run-down border city in the steppes, somewhere east of the Carpates. He is a single, middle-aged man having a sexual relationship with Zita, his housekeeper. As a governor, he has to move between the officers who take his orders and people such as the mayor, who ranks above him. Because of corruption in both layers, this is not an easy job.

Two women have been important in his life: Lea, the girl he was desperately in love with, and his mother, whom he lost at the age of 42. Beg thinks he has Jewish roots, and the quest for his identity is an important part of his life story.

The other story tells us about a group of refugees who move through the steppe. They suffer many hardships. Whenever they arrive in a village, it is never the village of their dreams but a deserted place, but when they travel on, they mourn these places and sigh, as the people of Israel in the desert: "Why didn't we stay put?" (Wieringa 2015, p. 27).

Their story started with the human trafficker Nacer Gül. After a sensational journey in a truck, they reach their destination. The driver tells them that they are close to the civilized world but this appears not to be the case. Gradually, the group disperses. After a while, five men, a woman, and a boy are left. The boy, a central character in the story, was chosen by his family to flee to a better world.

One of the five men is an Ethiopian who is called “Africa” by the travelers. He moves at a certain physical distance from the others, and at night he sleeps apart from the group. He has a little cross around his neck, which he sometimes kisses. The Ethiopian will not survive the journey. While some others die of exhaustion, he is killed. When the refugees arrive in Michailopol, they are soon to be arrested by the police. That is the moment the stories of Beg and the refugees intertwine.

3.1. A Scapegoat among the Refugees

“Strict self-interest improved the chances of survival” (Wieringa 2015, p. 54). To survive as a refugee one does not look after the others in a group. You rob your exhausted travel companions and eventually you abandon them. Acts of mercy are seen as irrational and reprehensible. When a man, who is called “the tall man”, collapses, the others walk on. “Africa”, however, shares water and a can of food with him, which makes the tall man regain his strength. His initial gratitude towards the Ethiopian turns into resentment and despal—and eventually shame. “How could he bear the black man’s self-sacrifice? How could you come to terms with owing your life to someone? How could you acquit yourself of that debt?” (Wieringa 2015, p. 70).

When the two men are back in the group, the tall man gradually distances himself from his savior. The Ethiopian is seen by the others as the cause of their troubles. He becomes the scapegoat. They blame the tall man for bringing the Ethiopian back in the group. “He is your friend, isn’t he”. The tall man denies: “He is not my friend.” When “Africa” is under fire from the group and tries to make eye contact with the tall man, the latter glances down.⁶ When the tall man dies, the Ethiopian is the only one who kneels down in prayer at his body. The corpse is then robbed of its possessions by the others.

Then, the Ethiopian is found dead too, his skull crushed. The decimated group pursues its way and finally arrives in Michailopol. There, the head of the Ethiopian is found in their luggage. Nobody takes responsibility for the murder but the refugees are unanimous about the necessity of his death. “He had to go so we could go on” (Wieringa 2015, p. 255). The boy starts to dream about the Ethiopian as the one who led the way to Michailopol.

In the group, gradually a new shared conviction is emerging. During his life the Ethiopian represented evil. By his fault, they almost perished because of disease and despair, but through his death he has saved them. They start to give their memories a different form:

“His death was inevitable, the way seed had to fall to the ground and perish in order to bring forth fruit again in spring. . . . Farming families . . . know about the eternal cycle. How new life sprouts from the dead” (Wieringa 2015, p. 272).

This belief is the foundation for their worship of the head of the Ethiopian. Although repelled by the relic, they nevertheless say thanks, and send pleas and spells to the head. They fear and honor the head and try to remember what their destiny has become because of it.

According to René Girard, the convictions of the group respond to the scapegoat mechanism (cf. Section 2.2). The stereotypes that are part of this mechanism—a social and cultural crisis, crimes, selection of victims, violence (Girard 1986, pp. 12–24)—can all be pointed out in the story of the refugees. There is a “crisis”: the circumstances that have made these people into refugees. Then, there are “crimes” and consequences caused by these “crimes”: the betrayal of the trafficker, the hardship which the refugees have to deal with, the diseases they suffer from, and their exhaustion. Eventually, the Ethiopian, the one who deviates from the group, the anomalous, is seen as the one who is guilty of the

crisis and crimes (“selection”). Subsequently, they try to remove the guilty one from the group with force. In the end, they try and succeed to kill him (“violence”).

The power the group ascribes to the head of the murdered Ethiopian resonates with Girard’s words (Girard 1986, p. 55): “He will be told about the extraordinary power of the victim, the occult influence he exercised and possibly still exercises on the community, for he has no doubt escaped death, etc.” Other parts of the story also fit in Girard’s argument. The silent treason of the tall man resembles Girard’s interpretation of Peter’s denial: despite their intimate bond, both traitor and victim cannot resist the scapegoat effect (Girard 1986, p. 105). In addition, the group justifies the Ethiopian’s death with a paraphrase of the words of Kajafas in the Gospel of John, cited by Girard: “it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people” (Girard 1986, p. 112).

For Girard, this quotation emphasizes his proposition that the Passion of Jesus demasks the scapegoat mechanism because Christ revealed that the scapegoat is innocent. According to Girard however, this exposure has been partly transformed into an aberration: it has led to a theology of the sacrifice that does not undermine the scapegoat mechanism but rather strengthens it. This is because the theology of the sacrifice glorifies the role of the scapegoat instead of exposing and criticizing the mechanism. Does Wieringa try to demask the scapegoat mechanism too or is he, in the end, undermining it? It seems that Wieringa is fascinated by these questions in his novel (see Dimitrova 2018a, 2018b). By analyzing the quest of Beg, we will try to answer this question.

3.2. Pontus Beg: Identity Regained?

Beg thinks his mother was Jewish. He suddenly remembers the melody and the text of a Jewish love song. It is about a girl named Rebekka. The “last Jew in Michailopol”, the rabbi Zalman Eder, helps him to identify the song.

With the help of rabbi Eder, Beg starts looking for his Jewish roots. In the synagogue Beg is impressed by the mikveh, the ritual bath. He longs to be cleansed and to receive a new soul. At the same time, he fears the consequences of such a transition. Would Zita still want to see him when he is circumcised? He realizes he cannot allow himself to lose Zita. Moreover, is it at all possible to answer the questions about his Jewish roots? Would it not be better to leave that search for what it is and carry on with his life as it has become? Yet he cannot deny he is a Jew and that deep down this fact determines his identity: “He had no doubts anymore. He must be a Jew—no, he *was* one. That was his place in the world, part of a people, of a community. A community extinct, but for one. That he belonged somewhere, that was the poignant thing” (Wieringa 2015, p. 144).

Beg is intrigued by Judaism because of its perception of time and its dealing with the past. For the rabbi, the past does not seem to exist. Present and past are both here and now. That is why every Jew has to see himself as a refugee from Egypt. “This mysterious timelessness overcame him [Beg], too, when he read about the lives of Moses, Aaron, and Joshua in the desert and knew himself connected to that in some mystical fashion. He was no longer alone. Others had gone before him, just as others would come after him” (Wieringa 2015, pp. 243–44).

Beg is particularly fascinated by the melting of the refugees’ story and the story of the Exodus. Both groups fled from poverty and oppression, and where the Jews carried the bones of Joseph, the refugees kept the head of the Ethiopian. However, is this a valid analogy? Is the cult evolving around the head perhaps better regarded as a perverted religiosity? During the interrogations, Beg gradually becomes convinced of this latter option. His suspicion of “idolatry” (Wieringa 2015, p. 262) is growing. When he consults the rabbi about the comparison, the religious teacher responds: “What you’re seeing is idolatry. Humans worshipping another human, their equal—a consecrated perversion of themselves. I hope your interest is strictly intellectual” (Wieringa 2015, p. 289).

3.3. Past and Present

For rabbi Zalman, the past and the present coincide, which resembles the way time was experienced in Near Eastern Antiquity in general and in Israel in particular. In the Hebrew Bible, Israel's agricultural feasts are related to experiences of liberation, such as the exodus from Egypt. In the celebration of Passover (*Pesach*), a remembrance of that event, the temporal distance between participants and ancient Hebrews is lifted. Some scholars speak of the feasts as "a moral motivation for obedience to the commandments" that is based on a "recollection of God's blessings in the past". Others argue that the celebration of feasts is an actualization of "the promise of salvation" (Eising 1980, p. 81). At the basis of these interpretations is the word "remember" (Hebrew: זָכַר *zākhār*). More than remembering the past, it is about reminiscing with the voice of your heart, to muse and meditate on what is remembered. It is remembrance through acting. In the celebration of *Pesach*, the Biblical exodus is thus made present, making a moral appeal to the *Pesach* participant (Eising 1980, pp. 65, 81).

The process of bringing the past into the present can be found in many ways in the Hebrew Bible, which speaks of "a new Exodus", "a new Covenant", "a new Moses", "a new David", and "a new Zion" (Leene 2014). Through *Leitworten*, "type-scenes" (comparable stories with a fixed motive) and allusions, continuity is established between the "original story" and the new situation (Alter 1981, pp. 47–51, 92–96; Alter 1992, pp. 107–30). This form of storytelling serves, according to Robert Alter, a particular goal: to make "out of the stuff of history a powerful projection of human possibility" (Alter 1981, 36).

In the "mysterious timelessness" of Zalman Eder, there is no room for longing for a lost paradise or the hope of the dissolving of an irretrievable past. The past is made present with the purpose of acting in the here and now. However, is this timelessness really about Pontus Beg? Beg regards himself a Jew, but is he really able to appropriate the Jewish past? Can he take on a new identity without being hurt? For Beg, the whole process is eventually too painful. He does not go into the water of the *mikve* (Wieringa 2015, pp. 273–74).

On another note, the refugees, too, can be seen as not conforming to the Jewish tradition as represented by rabbi Zalman. Seen from the perspective of "the exodus", they are the people who left their past behind and expressed the desire to live in the future. According to this perspective they will only be able to celebrate their liberation, their *Pesach*, once they arrive at their destination, a land of promises. This, however, is not the case. The exclusion and killing of the Ethiopian signify their constitution as a group; by killing the outsider, they were capable of solidarity. However, in a Girardian fashion, this process could only succeed when they started to worship their victim, but in the end, this exactly revealed their evil deeds. Therefore, they have become crime suspects and are even more unwanted than they already were as refugees. The ultimate goals of liberation and redemption—beautifully expressed in Zalman's story of the exodus—are thus not achieved.

Hope in *These Are The Names* perhaps lies somewhere else, in the real Promised Land. Pontus Beg begins to take care of the boy. At the end of the book, Beg promises to take him to Israel. This means that Beg is reconciled with his unknown past and that he would pass this on to his adopted son. It is after all the acceptance that he belongs to an unknown past, which is now a reality in the present. Beg is now also able to share his belonging with the refugee boy. This is their *Pesach*.

4. Conclusions

In the works we discussed, we see different ways in which the past plays a role. We have investigated this according to our reading of the scapegoat mechanism by René Girard. We have discovered three different ways in which Girard's key theory operates in the two works.

In *Calvaire*, it is the weakest person who becomes a victim of the fantasies of the men in the village. The singer Marc Stevens becomes a sacrifice, first, by being forced to act as the lost woman Gloria. Second, the attempt to kill Marc would mean that "Gloria" pays for

the fact that she left her husband and the other men. With the object of jealousy and desire gone, the men would be able to leave each other in peace again. In order to recover, they copy and revive a past scenario. In *Calvaire*, we thus see a perverse restoration of the past through a collective destructive fantasy which questions and eventually almost destroys the identity of the victim.

In *These Are The Names*, the killing and subsequent worship of the victim is necessary for the group to create a common identity because they are strangers to each other and have no shared past. By murdering the Ethiopian and worshipping him as their redeemer they avert the danger of killing each other. Through their worship, they begin to share a past: their fateful journey to the land of promises, culminating in the dramatic event of the murder of “Africa”. The worship of their victim thus makes them one people. The Ethiopian in *These Are The Names* is the obvious sacrifice in that story, as an attempt to create a common past. However, this book also shows a different perspective on this theme. Pontus Beg’s choice for the boy is the converging of the two storylines in the book, connecting Pontus’ newly discovered roots and the boy’s destiny in the Promised Land. Here, the past is no longer the inspiration to regain a lost paradise by a violent substitution. On the contrary, the past is present in such a way that it reveals the future. Crucial is Beg’s appropriation of his lost identity that makes him adopt the boy as his own, thus restoring a heritage. In this way, substitution is related to responsibility for the vulnerable instead of appropriation through violence.

In both stories, we see people actively working towards redemption and restoration, sometimes with brute force, often at the expense of others. The narratives show that redemption is (almost) impossible. The men in *Calvaire* destroy themselves: the perpetrators in their violent desire for a disappeared woman, the victim in his despair to survive their jealous rage. The refugees in *These Are The Names* seem lost, too, on their way to a safe haven. They kill the one who did not belong, thus forging a common destiny and identity for themselves. Even Pontus Beg cannot escape a forged redemption, but in his case, love and care are, in the end, the tools with which he imagines a life story that precedes him as well as casts its light into the future.

What these three perspectives have in common is that they all center on restoration through illusion, but this is where the similarity ends. While *Calvaire* shows an eventual failure of the scapegoat mechanism, the murder and subsequent worship of “Africa” represents this process in an almost exemplary form. Pontus Beg’s newly constructed identity falls outside this script. The latter case suggests that a made-up reality is able to redeem once it turns desire into a selfless love for the other. As such, these stories offer scenarios to which readers and viewers can relate, as they simultaneously inhabit both fictional and “real life” worlds. Watching movies and reading books gives—in Paul Ricoeur’s words—food for thought and might have a transforming effect.

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Notes

- ¹ Despite the fact that the theme of these stories touches upon trauma studies (e.g., [Caruth 1996](#); [Balaev 2014](#)), a focus on this aspect lies beyond the scope of our current research.
- ² Not a pig as many reviews of *Calvaire* state. Apparently, the idea of having sex with a pig appeals more to the imagination. We are reminded of the rape scene in *Deliverance* ([Welling 2005](#); cf. [Eggertsson and Forceville 2009](#)).
- ³ Similar substitutions can be seen in the film. Boris, for example, takes Marc for his lost dog Bella, and Boris eventually “finds” Bella—as a calf. The bestiality by the locals can also be seen as a form of substitution.

- ⁴ In French, “calvaire” is also the name for a way cross. Before his last confrontation with Robert, Marc sees a way cross which he attentively looks at for a short while. Lipsett and Thurman (2019) describe this as the fulfilment of Marc’s transformation, his ordeal, which started with his “crucifixion” in the stables.
- ⁵ There is an echo of the conversation between Jesus of Nazareth and the apostle Peter in which Jesus asks his disciple whether he really loves him (John 21:15). Here the roles are reversed: Robert would be Jesus and Marc, Peter. The Bible passage is seen as the reinstating of Peter after his betrayal of Jesus. In the film, it is Gloria who is reinstated because Marc betrays himself. Thus, the victim becomes what his perpetrator demands of him by showing him “mercy”. By absolving Robert, Marc betrays himself. Through his betrayal, the perpetrator dies and the victim escapes, but the latter has just killed himself.
- ⁶ Similar to *Calvaire*, there is an implicit reference to a passage in the Gospels about the apostle Peter (John 18:15–18), here regarding his disavowal (Wieringa 2015, pp. 132–36).

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