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Symbolická interpretace filmu Svatá Hora

Bakalářská práce

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Bakalářská práce se zabývá interpretací filmové klasiky režiséra Alejandra Jodorowského z pohledu kultury jako sémiotického systému. Cílem práce je analýza interpretačních metod a experiment, který spočívá v aplikaci symbolické antropologie (konkrétně konceptu klíčových symbolů dle Sherry Ortner) na umělecké dílo.

Práce má být příspěvkem k diskuzi o transkulturní komunikaci, a to zejména díky zacílení na tematiku symbolů, identity a rituálů umožňujících transformaci - ale také ústřední otázkou po existenci univerzálně platných hodnot a klíčových symbolů, které obtočí i v multikulturním střetávání velmi nesourodých perspektiv.

BACCARDO, Alberto. Hermeneutics of the Film World_ A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation-Palgrave Macmillan (2017).pdf

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Statement

I declare that I have prepared my bachelor thesis, Symbolic interpretation of the film *The Holy Mountain*, independently under the guidance of my thesis advisor and all sources and information used are duly cited in the list of references used.

In Hradec Králové, 30 April 2023

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Anotace

STOJNŠEK, Katja. *Symbolická interpretace filmu Svatá Hora*. Hradec Králové: Pedagogická fakulta Univerzity Hradec Králové, 2023, 38 s. Bakalářská práce

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Klíčová slova: Transkulturní komunikace, náboženství, rituál, liminalita, klíčové symboly

Annotation

STOJNŠEK, Katja. Symbolic interpretation of the film Holy Mountain. Hradec Králové: Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, 2023, 38 p. Bachelor Degree Thesis

The bachelor thesis is concerned with the interpretation of Alejandro Jodorowsky's film classic from the perspective of culture as a semiotic system. The aim of the thesis is to analyse the interpretive methods and experiment, which consists in the application of symbolic anthropology (specifically the concept of key symbols according to Sherry Ortner) to the artwork. The thesis is intended to contribute to the discussion of transcultural communication, especially by targeting the themes of symbols, identity and rituals that enable transformation – but also the central question of the existence of universally valid values and key symbols that can stand up to the multicultural clash of very contrasting perspectives.

Keywords: Transcultural communication, religion, ritual, liminality, key symbols

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Introduction

As if in a dream or in a surreal reality, beyond the personal boundaries of existence lies the transcendent self, hidden in the creator's mind. Maybe, for a moment, I was also in search of it, as the characters of the story were taking their journey. I was taking the journey with them, living by the rules of their imaginary world, distinguishing reality from imagination. The story proposes a combination of shamanistic rituals and the lost alchemy of Jewish mysticism and astrology that leads the path to enlightenment. Upon the first seeing, the film story made me ask myself: is it possible to reach the analogical Holy Mountain by the instruction of the alchemist, waiting in his tower through time and space indifferent?

I choose to include this introduction of naïve thoughts as a demonstration of what kind of impact a film can have on a person, even though it carries little or no meaning for the overall research of this avant-garde piece of art. The true reason for making this research is my personal interest in surrealistic films as I am trying to understand the connotation to the not-so-much-surreal reality they carry.

Therefore, this bachelor thesis will be a cultural analysis of symbols and themes that appear in the film *The Holy Mountain*. I understand that for a complete cultural analysis one should incorporate all aspects of historical, political, economic spheres, which will not be included in this work. This narrowed approach to the study of system of symbols will be applied with the theory "On Key Symbols" by Sherry Ortner. However, since the object of our research is a cultural artefact that reflects our experience of the world, we shall explore its meaning phenomenologically. We will combine the theory "On Key Symbols" with the hermeneutic interpretation approach to film studies that are inspired by Ricœur's model of interpretation of text, viewing the film as a cultural text.

There are two major question we will ask for the purpose of this study.

If it is possible to use the methodological approach "On Key Symbols" to interpret the films symbols and how successfully can we use the hermeneutical approach in combination with symbolic anthropology for meaningful interpretation of the film.

The theory “On Key Symbols” was initially designed for classifying the symbols that are crucial for understanding the symbolical structure of a given culture. The symbols we will be interested in convey emotion, provide orientation structures and modes the successful interaction. Our goal will be to find a way, how to apply this theory of key symbols for interpretation of the film *The Holy Mountain*.

Symbolic anthropology emphasizes the social dimensions of symbolic systems and the study of cultural practices and with this interdisciplinary approach of combining it with the hermeneutic interpretation, we want to establish a space where we can explore the symbolic content of values and belief, while perceiving the contradictory perspectives of the world we live in.

Methodology used

The thesis is structured in two chapters: Theoretical approach to interpretation and Case study of the film *The Holy Mountain* with a transcultural perspective. Both parts are complementary in terms of meaning and understanding that serves the task of this bachelor thesis for the interpretation of the film. The transcultural perspective will describe how we perceive symbolic structures and orientate in the world that sometimes seems internally fragmented and disorienting just like the surreal film *The Holy Mountain*.

The first chapter covers two topics: hermeneutical film analysis and anthropological approach to symbolism. The first chapter provides the theoretical framework for interpretation by establishing a space where film interpretation as a cultural text and its symbolism can be interpreted.

We will primarily use sources from philosophers and researchers from the field of philosophy and film studies: Susanne Langer, Alberto Baracco and Henry Bacon.

The second chapter is a case study of film themes, constructing and researching symbolic structure and its key symbols. The case study is primarily focused on the pattern of religion and explores the themes connected to it: sacred symbolism, passage rites, liminality and shamanism. The case study will be supported by the theoretical framework of Sherry Ortner, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas that provides insight into symbolic anthropology. I am aware that since the spectre of this research is immensely complex, we will not cover all its

aspects. We will describe the case studies, each time presenting the context of the scene before analysing them.

The Holy Mountain – introduction into the story

In total devastation a man sleeps in the wasteland, with flies covering his face. A dwarf wakes him up and together they travel to the city where they earn money by entertaining tourists.

Since he looks like Jesus Christ some locals take advantage of him and cast his body into wax and sell the resulting statues. The man, later described as the thief is worshipped by prostitutes and despised by the church. Walking through the city, he sees a high tower. Desperate for gold and money, the thief climbs into the tower where he meets the alchemist and his assistant. After a violent confrontation between them, the alchemist transforms thief's excrement into gold and offers him spiritual guidance.

The alchemist introduces him to seven people, who will partake in the spiritual journey with him: Huan, the cosmetics manufacturer; Isla, the weapon manufacturer; Birk, the millionaire art dealer; Sel, the military toy manufacturer; Uranus, the political financial adviser; Axon, the chief of police; and Lute, the architect. Together with the alchemist, the thief and the alchemist's assistant, they form a group of ten people.

The alchemist guides them through various rites of transformation. Their spiritual goal is to reach the Holy Mountain of the Lotus Island where they should claim the secret of immortality from the nine immortal men who live there.

Introducing the creator Alejandro Jodorowsky

Alejandro Jodorowsky, born in Tocopilla, Chile in 1929, is a Chilean-French artist and filmmaker acclaimed for his surrealist films, his work in theatre and comics. Jodorowsky's life work is characterized by a unique blend of surrealism, mysticism and psychomagic (a form of therapy that he developed based on his experiences and the teachings of various spiritual traditions). His most-known films, which include "El Topo" (1970) and "The Holy Mountain" (1973), are acclaimed for their surrealist imagery and unconventional narrative structures. As it is described in his book, *The Spiritual Journey of Alejandro Jodorowsky*, he was deeply

influenced by his experiences with spiritual practices of Zen Buddhism, Kabbalah, and tarot and believes that art and creativity are powerful tools for personal transformation. He claims that artist's role is to reveal the hidden truths of the human psyche.¹

¹ Based on: JODOROWSKY, Alejandro. *Psihomagija*. Ljubljana: Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, 2012.

1. Theoretical approach to interpretation

The practice of transcultural communication lies in the study of culture and its mechanisms, as well as its principles, structures, functions, meanings and – last but not least – symbols. Transcultural communication uses interdisciplinary approach connecting the fields of psychology, sociology, history, language, religion, art forms or science and technology; all for the purpose of questioning the inner mechanisms and principles of culture.²

Alberto Baracco explains that a good interpretation of a film should tell us something about our relation to a film as a way of exploring the human condition, about how we perceive and understand the world and what roles we can play in it.³ To answer the questions of how people relate to film, why and how they find it important, how it affects their life experiences, we should look into the task of hermeneutic analysis.⁴

Hermeneutic film interpretation is a type of interpretation that emphasizes the role of a viewer in creating meaning, bringing their own experiences, beliefs and values to that film.⁵ But we cannot understand a work of art outside the various social contexts to which it may relate, and in this regard, Bacon implies that just as humans need to be understood in terms of “being in the world” and “being in a given culture”, we are to look at film as a medium (a language) that mimics our way of being in the world.⁶

Furthermore, according to Bacon, we also need to take into account the form of the film as a whole – that it is indeed an artefact that was conceived in connection to historically situated agents. To study film in respect of cultural tradition and social formation, it requires the analysis of production, distribution and exhibition, involving the study of sociology, cultural studies and

² BURDA, František. *Za hranice kultur: Transkulturní perspektiva*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2016, p. 185.

³ BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 37.

⁴ LANGER, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a new key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1942] 1971, p. 3.

⁵ LANGER, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a new key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1942] 1971, p. 4.

⁶ BACON, Henry. *Synthesizing approaches in film theory*. *The Journal of Moving Image Studies*, 2005, p. 10.

hermeneutics.⁷ Although we may be conscious of this perspective, the object of this study will be optimized for the purpose of symbolic interpretation, not including the total construction of the functions and significance of the film as a cultural artefact.

Bacon points out that cultural studies and art studies complement each other. As has been already emphasized, the workings of a work of art cannot be understood outside the various social contexts to which it may relate.⁸

In regard of understanding social context, Clifford Geertz points out that cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete and we need to acknowledge that the deeper it goes, the less complete it is.⁹ What Geertz means, is that we will never fully understand or be able to interpret our own culture, but with the combination of hermeneutical understanding we will create a space for perceiving the symbolic structures we live in. We conclude this paragraph in the light of understanding that the “art” of interpretation is one of our main concerns of our existence as human beings.¹⁰

Humans grasp the world and understand it in terms of symbolic structures that give us the ability to symbolize, and are established upon coming into contact with other symbolic orders.¹¹ This point is relevant to the interpretation of how characters of this film come into contact with another symbolic systems of the Alchemist.

For the purpose of interpretation of the film *The Holy Mountain*, we will apply two different approaches in the study of human culture and meaning-making – the hermeneutic¹² and

⁷ BACON, Henry. *Synthesizing approaches in film theory*. The Journal of Moving Image Studies, 2005, p. 10.

⁸ BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 9.

⁹ BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 29-39.

¹⁰ BACON, Henry. *Synthesizing approaches in film theory*. The Journal of Moving Image Studies, 2005, p. 10.

¹¹ KARLOVÁ, Jana. *Domov, identita a světonázor*. Ostrava: Moravapress, 2014, p. 74.

¹² Hermeneutics is focused on the construction of meaning in the interpretation of texts by exploring the cultural context in which they are used and the perspective of those who created them. Text is based on REESE, William L. *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*. Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980, p. 221.

symbolic anthropological¹³ approach. They will be used for understanding not only the film, but also ourselves. In the next two parts we will explore the chosen interpretation techniques, before opening the transcultural perspective on how these two approaches complement each other.

1.1. Hermeneutical approach to film

Vivian Sobchack states that it is necessary to “*free oneself from the heavy burden of more than a century of film theories*”¹⁴. Trying to explain everything about film and the institution of cinema in a single theoretical framework would be an over-ambitious attempt, thus it is important to narrow our point of view. We want to explore different aspects of film experience and how they relate to us.¹⁵ We cannot describe film just as a material product and it’s also not a product of film-making as well as it’s not a transcendental or autonomous text of its own narrative. It can be described as a projection between the projection on the screen and the film spectator. In this sense, Baracco argues that a film is not a film without its spectator.¹⁶

Another attempt to address the problem of the hermeneutic method that seems relevant to this study would be the theory of Ditte Friedman. She presents a method that is anchored in five key themes: explanation-understanding, symbol, metaphor, narrative and imagination; the core matter of those five themes is allowing films to affect us and open the questions to symbolic discourse, defining it as a model of reality that provides a multi-level structure of meanings.¹⁷

¹³ Symbolic anthropology is a subfield of anthropology that is focused on the role of symbols and meaning in human societies. – HUDSON, Scott; SMITH, Carl; LOUGHLIN Michael; HAMMERSTEDT, Scott: “Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropologies”, <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/symbolic-and-interpretive-anthropologies>. Accessed on 8.05.2023.

¹⁴ SOBCHACK, Vivian Carol. *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. In the preface to *The Address of the Eye*, Sobchack stated, “*I want to begin again*”. In order to respond to such a demand, we need to go back to questioning film vision freely: “*vision as it is embodied, [...] as it radically entails a world of subjects and objects to make sense of them and of itself as it is lived*”.

¹⁵ BACON, Henry. *Synthesizing Approaches in Film Theory*. *The Journal of Moving Image Studies*, 2005, p. 1.

¹⁶ BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 43.

¹⁷ BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 97. Baracco refers to Ditte Friedman’s theory from an article: “*Writing on Film as Art through Ricœur's Hermeneutics*”. 2010.

The hermeneutical approach involves a deep engagement with a film as the viewer seeks to uncover its underlying meaning and message that corresponds with human beings. This specific type of interpretation emphasizes the ways in which a film is open to **multiple interpretations** as these interpretations are shaped by the viewer's own background, experiences and cultural context. For example, two viewers can watch the same film but interpret it in very different ways based on their own perspectives, as well as the different cultural or historical contexts they come from.¹⁸

For basic orientation in the theoretical approach to film hermeneutics, this paragraph summarises guidelines that derive from Ricoeur's¹⁹ model exploring how one should analyse film content as holistically as possible²⁰, before moving to the next chapter that deals with the study of system of symbols:

- Understanding that film expresses many possible symbolic meanings;
- Understanding that critical practice is initially inspired by personal perspective;
- That the first step of the interpretation is a naïve understanding of the film based on the initial guesswork that needs reflection;
- That for the critical understanding of the symbolic meanings the study of a system of symbols is crucial;
- That there is a need for reflection on other person's perspective of the interpretation while being aware of multiple meanings that change over time;
- That there is a need of being aware of own experiences of understanding and the need to question the interpretations;
- Inscribing the interpretations of the film in a hermeneutic circle that moves towards future interpretations.

The guideline summarises the basic principles of hermeneutic analysis of film. In our case of the interpretation of *The Holy Mountain* we should therefore take into the account that the film expresses many possible symbolic meanings and that the processing of the information is dependent on the researcher. It is necessary to study the symbolic system, symbols and culture (and its patterns), but with the act of **self-reflection**. This means being aware that the film has

¹⁸ BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricoeurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 13.

¹⁹ We are referring to *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* by Paul Ricoeur.

²⁰ BACON, Henry. *Synthesizing Approaches in Film Theory*. *The Journal of Moving Image Studies*, 2005, p. 8-11.

multiple symbolic meanings that change over time. Hermeneutics opens the space for understanding and interpreting our own symbolic system aligning with the postmodernist interpretation of our own “reality”. The following chapter continues the search for meaning and how to theoretically perceive symbols.

1.2. Anthropological approach to the system of symbols

Culture, according to Geertz, is “*a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. Its function is to impose meaning on the world and make it understandable for human beings*”.²¹

Even though anthropologists from different theoretical standpoints agree that symbols are a crucial part of culture, for example, neo-evolutionistic anthropologist Leslie White claims: “*The symbol is the universe of humanity*”²², few have addressed in what way they function. Edward Sapir distinguished two kinds of symbols, primary and secondary, but did not provide the meaning how they are used.²³

Geertz, on the other hand, proposes the standpoint that a symbol is used to indicate a variety of things: that it can explicitly function as a sign (a red flag as a symbol of danger, a white flag as a symbol of surrender) or to mark the meaning of several things at once. At their core, Geertz argues, “*all these symbols or symbolic elements are concrete formations of concepts, abstractions from established experience, and specific embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, desires or beliefs*”.²⁴

²¹GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 89.

²² WHITE, Leslie. *The symbol: The Origin and Basis of Human Behavior*. 1944, p. 229, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42581318>. Accessed on 8.05.2023.

²³ MOORE, Jerry D. *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. Plymouth: AltaMira Press, 2009, p. 252. We refer to Edward Sapir classification of symbols. Primary symbols – a “*picture of a dog meaning dog*” – secondary symbols, “*the connection between words or combinations of words and what they refer to can no longer be directly traced*”, as in the phrase: “*Red, white and blue mean freedom*”.

²⁴ GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 90.

Turner's contribution to the discourse is connecting the symbol with the **social action**. The symbols convey different meaning according to the event and their positioning.²⁵ For instance, the symbol of the American flag has different meanings if it is hanged in a schoolyard, pinned on the back of a car, or if it covers the coffin of a fallen soldier. The image of the symbol is the same, but the meaning it portrays is different.²⁶

To conclude, we need to recognise that a single symbol represents several things at once: it is multivocal, not univocal²⁷ as Turner describes. We will further investigate the meaning symbols can portray with the scheme Sherry Ortner proposes. It is important for us to understand these aspects of symbols, as the film analysis of *The Holy Mountain* consists of understanding their different aspects of meaning.

1.2.1. Theory “On Key Symbols”

In this chapter we will explain the theory of Sherry B. Ortner. She proposes indicating symbolic units which formulate meaning rather than to take interest in the meaning systems themselves. We can call these symbolic units, *core* or *key symbols*. They operate in relation to cultural thought and action and correspond with being the vehicle of cultural meaning. At this point, we should also recognise that there is not only one key symbol to every culture.²⁸

Ortner proposes a subdividing and ordering set in terms of their function. Some of them express cultural thought while other express cultural action. They are a continuum, sometimes working on either side, but for our purposes of classification we are ought to divide them in their ideal type.²⁹

Summarising symbols are those symbols which sum up, express and represent complex ideas. They are emotionally powerful and “stand for” the system as a whole. Even though their

²⁵ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 52.

²⁶ MOORE, Jerry D. *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. Plymouth: AltaMira Press, 2009, p. 252.

²⁷ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 52.

²⁸ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1340.

²⁹ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1340.

primary function is to compose rather than to classify experiences, they form basic orientations and suggest a certain way of acting. Usually, they include the sacred symbols in the traditional sense.³⁰

Elaborating symbols can be subdivided into the **root metaphors** and **key scenarios**. They work by sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to the self, communicable to others and translatable into orderly action. These symbols are rarely sacred.³¹

The root metaphor establishes a certain view of the world and operates to sort out the experiences while putting them into cultural categories. They suggest how thought is organised through analogies, such as metaphor.³²

The key scenarios provide strategies for organising experience that occurs by prescribing certain culturally effective courses of action, or a “vision of success” which embodies certain assumptions about the nature of reality. Every culture has several key scenarios that formulate defined goals and at the same time suggest effective actions to achieve them – defined as key cultural strategies. The category may also include individual elements of rituals, objects, roles, sequences of actions. Scenario is culturally valued, which is evident from the fact that it is played and repeated in a wide variety of social contexts as it proposes a clear strategy for achieving culturally defined success.³³

We will use this theory for the purpose of classifying the symbols that emerge in *The Holy Mountain*. Some of the key symbols will fall into the *summarising* category as they sum up religious ideas and will provide information how they stand for the “system as a whole”. We will also observe how they are used according to their position in the story. *Key elaborating symbols* will help us sort out the more complex feelings and ideas while providing the framework to understand processes such as transition rites and identity transformation.³⁴

³⁰ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1341.

³¹ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1340.

³² ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1340.

³³ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1339.

³⁴ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1341.

Overall symbolic anthropology seeks to understand the meanings and values that are attached to these symbols, and how they are used to create and reinforce social identities, relationships and power structures within a society.³⁵ In the case study we will explore how cultural symbols change in a situation and how they are used to express meaning and values. Apart from that, we will apply hermeneutic point of view, emphasizing the role of the viewer in creating the meaning.³⁶

³⁵ HUDSON, Scott; SMITH, Carl; LOUGHLIN Michael; HAMMERSTEDT, Scott: “Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropologies”, <https://anthropology.ua.edu/theory/symbolic-and-interpretive-anthropologies>. Accessed on 8.05.2023.

³⁶ “*The active role played by the flmgoer not only in the reception of flm but also in the very construction of the flm world is crucial in the perspective adopted by the constructivist school and represented by thinkers such as Bordwell, Carroll and Currie.*” – BARACCO, Alberto. *Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Ricœurian Method for Film Interpretation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

2. Case study of *The Holy Mountain*

In the case study of *The Holy Mountain*, we will apply the before described theory “On Key Symbols” and interpret it with the method of hermeneutic interpretation.

Focusing on concepts, experiences, ideas, attitudes, judgments and beliefs the film depicts, the prominent observation of this case study will be the structure of cultural patterns in the society and the symbolism it portrays. We find that *The Holy Mountain* can be viewed as a film that both portrays the religious thought and action but also ridicules it. Therefore, in order to understand what makes symbolism sacred or secular, we ought to investigate religion as a cultural pattern.

The case study will include chapters on sacred symbolism, ritual, liminality and shamanism. We will analyse scenes relevant to the topic of the research and interpret them using secondary sources, viewing the film as a cultural artefact while using theoretical insights from the field of symbolic anthropology.

2.1. Religion as a system of symbols

Geertz defines cultural pattern, i.e., “*systems or complexes of symbols that are general features which are extrinsic sources of information.*”³⁷ This theory explains that the internal structure used for the understanding of symbols is a form of a model of “reality” in which we perceive religious thought. Overall, the religious patterns do not only reveal in the study of the social and psychological roles of religion, but occur in the correlation between specific ritual acts and specific secular social bonds, as well as the symbolic action.³⁸

Religion, according to Langer, is a “*conception of the essential pattern of human life where almost any object, action or event contributes to its function.*” We can understand by this that the religious aspect does not derive from tradition, but upon being practiced. As an example,

³⁷ GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 92. By extrinsic, Geertz refers to the “*intersubjective worlds of shared understanding into which all human individuals are born into*” and by sources of information Geertz refers to the “*template in terms of which processes external to each other can take definitive form.*”

³⁸ GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 125.

Langer states that sacred objects are not intrinsically valuable, but their value derives from their religious use.³⁹

Another example of how value is prescribed would be with some sacred symbols. For example, the cross, the crescent or the feathered serpent have meaning for those for whom they resonate because “*their power derives from their ability to identify reality with value and to give complex normative significance to what is otherwise merely factual*” according to Geertz.⁴⁰

A demonstration of how value is formed and how religious pattern affects individual’s social and psychological roles upon being indrawn by symbolic imagery and action is in the case study in the “*group formation*” scene. The narrative context of this scene is that the alchemist gathers the characters that are described as the most powerful and the wealthiest people on the planet in his alchemical tower and gives them a presentation about his spiritual practice.

2.1.1. Case study of religious pattern as a model of reality

01:15:47 “Group formation” scene

He presents them a myth of nine immortal men that live on the top of the Holy Mountain of the Lotus Island, and tells them about their mortality and boundaries they have as human beings. The myth describes men that direct our world, holding the secret of the conquest of death. The alchemist invites the characters to follow him on a spiritual journey, for the purpose of obtaining immortality from those nine men. If they are to follow his instructions with the “correct formula” he invented (through the combination of ancient manuscripts, religions and practices), they are sure to succeed. He tells them to unite as a group and ascend with him to the top of the great Holy Mountain to reach the desired immortality and enlightenment. The scene closes with the characters holding hands while the alchemist proclaims that to achieve success, they must cease being individuals and become collective beings.

³⁹ LANGER, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a new key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1942] 1971, p. 155.

⁴⁰ GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 127.

The key concept of this scene is a change in their “model of reality”. They should change, as Murphy describes, their individual and social identities and accept a new religious pattern that will be rooted in the collective life, reflecting and changing their roles in society.⁴¹

The key concept of this scene, is that they should change their previous perception of identity as individualists. With the scheme of the *key symbols*, we can categorise the perceived symbols. *Summarising symbol* would be the pictogram of the Holy Mountain as it becomes a sacred object representing belief. *The root metaphor* is the mountain itself as it represents a spiritual journey and provides orientation for the characters – what they strive for. The *key action*, the vision of success for the characters, is to transform their identity to become collective beings. This scene touches on the most important part of forming religious thought that unites individuals into the same symbolic structure.

The scene is also important for understanding the context to which the characters emotionally react. The next chapter will explore the properties of summarising symbols, but in another perspective. We will observe how we as the spectators of this film react to the traditional sacred symbolism that appears in the film according to its position.

2.2. Sacred symbolism in the film

The film imagery is full of symbolism and includes the sacred symbols from Jewish, Buddhist and Christian traditions. All are objects of reverence and/or catalysts of emotion. Sacred symbols are a complex system of ideas that function for the whole system of religious thought.⁴² Geertz claims that the sacred symbols work by synthesizing the ethos of people and form their worldview – the “picture” people have of how things actually are and what the idea of order is. Religious symbols therefore form the basic agreement between a particular lifestyle and a perception of order.⁴³

The motives of the film correlate with the viewer and with his perception of those religious symbols. For example, the alchemist’s rainbow room is full of different religious symbols such

⁴¹ MURPHY, Robert Francis. *Cultural and Social Anthropology: An Overture*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1979, p. 255.

⁴² ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1340.

⁴³ GEERTZ, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 90.

as I Ching hexagrams, occultist symbols tattooed on the body of the naked apprentice and two stuffed goats beside the alchemist's throne. We perceive them as the visual components of the film and wonder what is the purpose of their position and what emotional meaning they convey.

The next part explains several key summarising symbols that are crucial for understanding the story. We will be interested in their functions in relation to our system of symbols and how they are used for the purpose of providing a complex system of meanings while expressing a certain ethos/worldview. The meaning of this chapter is not to observe how the character of the story interacts with the symbols, but rather how we perceive them.

2.2.1. Case study of sacred symbols

00:12:05 "Christ for sale"

Three overweight Roman soldiers and a man dressed as a Virgin Mary are selling statues of Jesus Christ on the street corner. The thief accompanied by the dwarf comes to them and takes a cross upon his shoulders – imitating Jesus's path of Via Dolorosa⁴⁴. While he carries the cross, tourists stand on the sides entertained, laughing and capturing his performance on a camera. Afterwards, the thief gets drunk with the soldiers and passes out. Upon waking up, he finds himself in a room full of potatoes amidst thousands of copies of his figure in the shape of a crucified Christ that the soldiers made while he was sleeping. The thief screams and breaks almost all of the copies in fury, before embracing one of them.

The image of crucified Christ is complex as it falls into the category of objects of cultural respect – a synthesis of a complex experience.⁴⁵ The symbol in the film is used in a satirical way, for example: the overweight Roman soldiers that are selling the statues in the presence of a man dressed in the clothes of Virgin Mary, the thief performance as Jesus Christ in presence of laughing tourists, the unsettling image of a thousand copies of crucified Jesus Christ on the top of piles of potatoes. The symbol itself carries symbolic meaning, but depending on the situation in which it is used, the meaning shifts (from salvation and aggression to satire).

⁴⁴ Latin for "the sorrowful way".

⁴⁵ See ORTNER, Sherry B. "On Key Symbols" in *American Anthropologist*, 1973.

In the following scene twelve prostitutes and a monkey gaze upon a golden statue of Jesus Christ in a church. Afterwards they encounter the thief carrying the before-embraced copy of himself in the position of crucified Christ. They recognise the thief as the Saviour and follow him around the city. This scene gives another example of how the sacred symbol is being used as an object of worship and belief as it is set in the church and perceived by the prostitutes as an object of salvation.

Another appearance of the symbol of the crucified Jesus in a provocative manner is as following: the thief walks around the city, being followed by the twelve prostitutes and a monkey. He goes into an old church where he puts his wax copy on the altar next to a rotting Bible full of worms. In the middle of the church, he finds a dusty bed with a sleeping bishop who embraces the missing statue from the altar. When the bishop awakes, he screams and kicks the thief and his statue out of the church. Again, the meaning of this symbol is different according to its position, this time expressing the “rotting” nature of old institutions that – according to our interpretation of the symbol – lost good morals and dignity.

00:47:30 „Symbolic weapons” scene

In this scene, Isla, the manufacturer of weapons from the planet Mars, presents the manufacturing process of weapons she is producing. She describes techniques how to attract customers of different nationalities and religions. She manufactures decorated weapons with sacred symbols according to the customers’ beliefs – for Buddhists a gun with Buddha, for Jews a menorah⁴⁶ and for Christians the figure of Jesus Christ. In this example sacred symbols express that in secular societies, money and power have more meaning than tradition and religious belief.

All of those key summarising symbols portray how fragmented the society is in the perception of symbols that offer multiple versions of interpretation according to the context in which they are used.⁴⁷ We can conclude that sacred symbols represented in the film challenge the viewer’s perception of value whether something can be sacred in the film or in our society with such

⁴⁶ *The menorah, multi-branched candelabra, used in the religious rituals of Judaism, that has been an important symbol in both ancient and modern Israel.* Found in Newman, Yacov; Sivan, *Judaism A-Z: Lexicon of Terms and Concepts*. Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization, 1980, p. 256.

⁴⁷ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, and KARLOVÁ, Jana. *Domov, identita a světonázor*. Ostrava: Moravapress, 2014.

opposing values and perspectives. Just as the crucified Jesus in the film carries different meanings (salvation, profit, satire, taboo, power, moral justice/injustice) we can also observe these properties in relation to our world.

2.3. Ritual as manifestation of symbols

Continuing with the universality of the concepts of religion and what it seeks to formulate, Langer describes religion as “*drawing all nature into the domain of ritual*”⁴⁸. Turner sees the study of rituals as the key for understanding the essential constitution of human societies. He states that rituals reveal the values of individuals and groups and their true emotional content.⁴⁹ We will explore this domain in the following chapters focused on transition rites, liminality and shamanism. We will again observe the characters’ vision of success which is *the key scenario* in order to formulate what they need to do to achieve it.

These subjects (characters) of observation are interconnected with the psychological and social factors regarding identity in which we will also be interested in. We start with the interpretation of the ritual from the very first scene of the film, which depicts a symbolic component of the ritual: body modification and transition of identity.

2.3.1. Case study of body modification

00:00:00 “Cutting the hair” scene

Two blonde women are sitting next to each other in white dresses and strong make-up. Between them is a figure of the alchemist, dressed in black. He performs a simple “ritual”, cleaning the women’s faces and tearing off their clothes. Afterwards he shaves their hair and embraces them.

We perceive that the identity of the women is being altered as they let the alchemist, as an authority, transform their visual appearance. Arnold van Gennep states that to cut the hair is to symbolically separate oneself from the previous world, and the process of dedicating the hair is to bind oneself to the sacred world. This “sacrifice of hair” includes two distinct operations:

⁴⁸ LANGER, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a new key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1942] 1971, p. 158.

⁴⁹ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 95.

cutting the hair, and dedicating, consecrating or sacrificing it. Handling of the hair thus often falls into the category of rites of passage.⁵⁰ The film does not depict what happens to the hair, but the scene marks a change in social status for those that undergo a change of social persona, where all previous signs of identity are being suppressed.⁵¹

Every culture is a set of interconnected structures that encompass social forms, values and knowledge, through which all experiences are transmitted. Certain cultural themes are expressed through rituals of bodily manipulation, such as the above mentioned cutting of hair.⁵² The next case study will describe another example of how body manipulation works in a ritualistic setting as a way of transforming identity. The narrative context of this scene is that the thief meets the alchemist upon arriving to his tower from the city and fights him. The alchemist spiritually and physically wins over the thief and performs surgery on him, cutting a tumour from his neck (that contained an octopus). In that context, the alchemist offers more gold to the thief, to which he gives consent.

2.3.2. Case study of transformation of identity

00:30:43 “You are excrement” scene

The alchemist and his assistant clean the thief’s whole body – his hair, feet, body and anus. He is then given a bowl that he uses as a toilet. The alchemist dresses himself in Jewish religious clothing and puts both the thief’s faeces and the thief into a glass structure that represents a distillation apparatus. The alchemist performs a chemical process, transforming the faeces through different materials into gold. During the process, the thief physically suffers, not being able to breathe in the glass structure, while also sweating and puking. When the transformation is complete, the thief is presented with the gold they transformed. The alchemist speaks to him: “You are an excrement; you can change yourself into gold!” The thief then breaks the mirror with the gold he received upon seeing his own reflection. With that action, the thief is accepted as the alchemist’s apprentice.

⁵⁰ VAN GENNEP, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 166-167.

⁵¹ MURPHY, Robert Francis. *Cultural and Social Anthropology: An Overture*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1979, p. 234.

⁵² DOUGLAS, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, [1966] 2001, p. 158-159.

Rituals act on the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body⁵³ and we can perceive what kind of impact the act of washing has on the thief. He obeys authority of the alchemist and undergoes the purification process; first being washed and then being “distilled” in the glass structure. His suffering carries symbolic meaning as he experiences pain, while breaking the mirror is an act of rejection of the past perception of self. The listed symbolic acts propose the vision of success⁵⁴ – the key scenario of what the character needs to undergo in order to reach enlightenment. The next chapter deals with the examination of the ritual setting, focusing on the process of liminality which is crucial for understanding the vision of success in the film.

2.4. Liminality in the rites of passage

In this chapter we will describe the different phases of liminality which an individual or a group undergoes. Arnold van Gennep in his book *Rites de Passage* states that all rites of passage are marked by three stages: separation, transition and incorporation. The subject is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards that hold the system of position together.⁵⁵ For instance, neither of the characters questions the authority of the alchemist at any point of the film. The subjects must follow the strategy provided by the authority of the alchemist in order to be successful in the rites of passage.

The first phase of the described process is “the separation” which comprises the symbolic behaviour marking the separation of an individual or a group from the social structure.⁵⁶ We can find the example in the scene where the thief chooses to separate himself from the city and his previous social structure for the purpose of becoming the alchemist’s apprentice. Another example would be the other characters arriving to the alchemist’s tower, leaving their positions as the most powerful people on the planet in order to become liminal subjects.

⁵³ DOUGLAS, Mary. *Purity and danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, [1966] 2001, p. 158-159.

⁵⁴ ORTNER, Sherry B. “On Key Symbols” in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1338-1340.

⁵⁵ VAN GENNEP, Arnold, *The rites of passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 11.

⁵⁶ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 94-95.

In the intermediate “liminal” period, the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous as they pass through a cultural sphere that has few or no characteristics of past or future conditions.⁵⁷ For example, we may describe the thief being accepted as the alchemist’s apprentice, undergoing personal transformation. With no past and no future, he owns nothing and represents nothing.

In the third phase of “reincorporation”, the transition is complete, and the ritual subject, individual or group, are once again in a relatively stable state with clearly defined rights and obligations.⁵⁸ In the film, after all the rites of transformation, the alchemist sends the thief back to the city where he is instructed to change the world for the better according to what he had learned on his journey.

2.4.1. Case study of the separation stage

01:06:24 “Burning of the money and self-image” scene

All the characters described above arrive to the alchemist’s tower and their process of separation begins. They are wearing clothes that express their status and role in the society as the wealthiest and most powerful people on the planet. They sit around a round table with a fire in the middle of it and the alchemist instructs them to burn their money. The characters open their suitcases and with resentment start to burn the money they brought with them. The thief and the assistant wait silently as they already own nothing. As the scene proceeds, each character holds a wax statue of their naked self and the alchemist instructs them to destroy their self-image (which is described as unsteady, wavering, bewildered, full of desire, distracted and confused). The alchemist poetically proclaims: “*When the self-concept thinks, this is I and this is mine, he binds himself and he forgets the Great Self.*” Each of them burns their wax figure.

⁵⁷ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 94-95.

⁵⁸ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 94-95.

As the characters undergo the process described above, they become subjects in the process of liminality. They must be a **tabula rasa**, as described by Turner, on which the knowledge and wisdom are written down in relation to the new status.⁵⁹

Liminal character must have no status, no property, no insignia, no rank or role, no position in the system – nothing that can distinguish them from other neophytes or initiates.⁶⁰ In the scene described above, the subjects are still in the *separation phase* as they are still wearing makeup, dressed in their extravagant clothes and acting arrogantly. Symbolically they are not yet a group, but still hold their position as individuals.

2.4.2. Case study of the liminal phase

1:21:26 Case study of “the massage” scene

After burning their wax statues, the group arrives to simple house in the mountains where they meet the figure of the shaman. They kiss his hands and he gives them a massage. The group participates and learns his techniques. In the process of it, one character separates and pukes while complaining about the shaman’s smell. Upon perceiving the act, the alchemist attacks him and breaks his bones. He drags him back to the group and they practice the healing massage on him, putting his bones back together.

This scene is an example of how the liminal subject should behave. Behaviour of liminal subjects is usually passive or humble; they must obey their instructors unquestioningly and accept punishment without complaint.⁶¹ In the film the character is being disrespectful to the shaman, therefore the alchemist breaks his legs. The trials and humiliations, often of a crude physiological nature, are partly a destruction of their previous statuses and serve to prepare them for their new responsibilities and to keep them from abusing their new privileges in advance.⁶²

⁵⁹ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 95.

⁶⁰ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 96.

⁶¹ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 95-103.

⁶² TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 95-103.

Another aspect of the liminal subjects is that they can be represented as having nothing. They may be dressed as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even be naked⁶³, as in the first scene of the film (00:00:00), to show that as liminal beings they have no status. Other examples of how the characters are dressed during their liminal process: 01:21:48: All dressed in the same clothes when meeting the mountain shamans; 01:24:53: being naked in the ritual setting; 01:33:42: wearing the same blue sailor suits on the boat; 01:35:55: everyone cutting their hair and wearing blue alpinist clothes. This is supported by the statement that among themselves, liminal subjects are prone to intense camaraderie and egalitarianism.⁶⁴

In order to explain the phenomena of the shaman⁶⁵ we will now progress to the next chapter of the study that focuses on the role of the shaman in the transition process. In the case study that follows we will explain the last phase of *reincorporation* when the individuals return to a stable state and should once again have defined personalities as well as right and obligation in the society, reaching a stable state of identity.⁶⁶

2.5. Shamanism and altered states of consciousness

North and South American Indians often induced trance states with psychoactive substances. They used and still use a wide variety of drugs and hallucinogens, most commonly tobacco.⁶⁷ The film depicts a substance described as “the Flower”. We may identify this symbol as a root metaphor in the film that represents not only its physical substance, but also its deeper relation to its function representing the “knowledge” in their existence.

⁶³ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 95.

⁶⁴ TURNER, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. New York: Cornell University, [1969] 1977, p. 95-103.

⁶⁵ DOUGLAS, Mary. *Purity and danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, [1966] 2001, p. 140. By Mary Douglas a shaman is a healing person who in order to identify the pollution or a disease, recognises that all spiritual powers are part of the social system and provide the institutions to manipulate it.

⁶⁶ VAN GENNEP, Arnold. *The rites of passage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 166-167.

⁶⁷ MURPHY, Robert Francis. *Cultural and Social Anthropology: An Overture*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1979, p. 204.

The person who is “passing this knowledge” to the characters is the figure of Shaman, whose function we will describe in this chapter as well as substances that enhance trance in rituals.⁶⁸

According to Murphy, shamans control supernatural forces by magical compulsion, by direct contact with the spiritual world. A shaman, popularly known as a medicine man (or a woman), is a religious practitioner whose supernatural powers derive from contact with the spirit world and his ability to compel spirits to cooperate with humans. The shaman is an individual practitioner and his contact with the supernatural is personal.

In the case study, we will observe the character undergoing intense shamanistic ritual with shamans and mind-altering substances. The key scenario still portrays the same vision of success, what the characters need to do and how they need to act in order to become a group to reach enlightenment.

2.5.1. Case study of reintegration phase

01:24:37 “The flower” scene

The group arrives at the ruins of a temple in the mountains, where a shaman is awaiting them. The shaman speaks of *the Flower* (psychedelic substance) and its hidden knowledge.⁶⁹ The characters take off their clothes and run in the field of flowers. Afterwards the shaman collects the flower dust from their bodies, cuts them and applies the flower substance into their blood circulation. Everyone in the group starts to experience a trance state; the colours, sounds and movement being intensified as the characters hallucinate. In the trance state the group experiences collective state of being.

⁶⁸ MURPHY, Robert Francis. *Cultural and Social Anthropology: An Overture*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1979, p. 204.

⁶⁹ SAMUEL, Geoffrey. *Tantric Revisionings; New Understandings of Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Religion*. London: Routledge, 2005, p. 74. – “... *the regulation and transformation of human life and human society through the use (or purported use) of alternate states of consciousness by means of which specialist practitioners are held to communicate with a mode of ,reality‘ alternative to, and more fundamental than, the world of everyday experience.*” – We may interpret *the hidden knowledge* as a form of consciousness, that the subject strive to reach upon.

Murphy describes trance as a highly individualised state of consciousness that is almost by definition removed from social reality and for that reason, identity can be transformed in the process, the subjects' beings removed from the social reality.⁷⁰

After the process is finished and the characters' hallucinations are gone, they are asked to count every person in the group. As each person is counting, they always forget to include themselves. They are then asked to look into the reflection on the water. When each of them looks, they do not recognise themselves, but describe the reflection as "the missing person". We may interpret this as the last stage of the transition process; the third phase of *reincorporation*.

The following scene features the characters emotionally experience their own death while becoming an "empty heart". As the transition is complete, the ritual subjects are in a stable state and have a clearly defined collective identity as a group, successfully forgetting their past social status as the wealthiest people on the planet – with that they fulfil the vision of success.

Theory "On Key Symbols" by Sherry Ortner was used to distinguish the symbols which provide cultural strategies of the vision of success⁷¹ in the combination of hermeneutic analysis, perceiving the meaning of the film through the spectator. In the next chapter we will include the transcultural perspective that emerged in the last scene of the film. When the characters successfully become a group, they go through the last obstacles that challenge their commitment to the idea of the Holy Mountain. The character overcome their worst fears and obsessions and successfully arrive at the summit of the Holy Mountain.

As they arrive to the summit, the story takes a turn, which we will describe in relation to the transcultural perspective of hermeneutic interpretation as well as to the topic of overstepping the boundaries of perception while perceiving order in the symbolic structures.

⁷⁰MURPHY, Robert Francis. *Cultural and Social Anthropology: An Overture*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1979, p. 193.

⁷¹ ORTNER, Sherry B. "On Key Symbols" in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, p. 1340.

2.6. Transcultural perspective of the film themes

Upon the characters arriving at the summit of the Holy Mountain they find out that the nine immortal men are puppets. The Alchemist, not looking only at the characters, but “breaking the fourth wall”⁷² and addressing us, the spectators of the film, proclaims: “*We are images, dreams, photographs. We must not stay here. Prisoners. We shall break the illusion! This is Maya! Goodbye to the Holy Mountain. Real life awaits us!*”

We can interpret this ending as breaking through boundaries of perception, as the film addresses the spectators. Thanks to that we can formulate that the film as a whole challenges the spectator to investigate themes and symbols, not only of the story, but also in himself.

Humans grasp the world and understand it in terms of symbolic structures that give us the ability to symbolize and are established upon coming into contact with other symbolic orders and are being confused and disturbed by them.⁷³ This point is relevant to the interpretation of how characters of the film come into contact with other symbolic systems of the spiritual authority of the alchemist. Through the process of becoming liminal subjects, they change their perception of order and function – not being concerned with their possessions, self-image, perception of self, fears and obsessions. In the case of *The Holy Mountain* the *symbolic system* shapes the identity of the characters and conditions them to go through the transition process of *liminality*.

This process enables us to see a direct transcultural theme of overcoming nationalism and segregational tendencies of culture, ethnicity and religion rooted in a certain cultural identity.⁷⁴ The liminal subjects are in unity – the thief who has nothing is equal with the wealthiest people on the planet.

Another transcultural perspective is that we might feel disoriented when perceiving different symbols and symbolic systems used in the film. The film is full of references to symbols and

⁷² „Breaking the fourth wall” refers to the act of a character or narrator in a work of fiction acknowledging their existence within the story and addressing the audience directly. It is often used as a device to create a sense of meta-awareness or to comment on the story itself.

⁷³ KARLOVÁ, Jana. *Domov, identita a světonázor*. Ostrava: Moravapress, 2014, p. 74-75.

⁷⁴ BURDA, František. *Za hranice kultur: transkulturní perspektiva*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2016, p. 279.

themes such as consumerism, unfairness of the social structure as well as the horror of Mexican history. In our society, the growth of symbolic complexity unsettles the stability and security of the social environment in which one finds oneself with an increasing sense of anxiety and meaninglessness⁷⁵, and we can observe this in accordance with the film. Many times, symbols are used in a brutal way that provokes our understanding of the world. When the film shows scenes of women being raped, surreal scenes with crucified animals or a machine giving birth after being penetrated, we find ourselves speechless, our symbolic world crashing with what we find „acceptable“, or simply taboo.

And just as the film oversteps different boundaries, “breaks the fourth wall” or ambushes the spectator with different symbols and references, we should acknowledge that viewing and thinking about the film themes and their connotations to our world might serve as a great way to understand ourselves, our values, how we perceive order and what is our perception of the world – challenging us to break our own boundaries.

⁷⁵ KARLOVÁ, Jana. *Domov, identita a světonázor*. Ostrava: Moravapress, 2014, p. 73-75.

3. Conclusion

The film *The Holy Mountain* had an intensive impact on me, as it was rich in symbolism, provocative in thought and beauty. For the purpose of exploring the deeper structures it portrayed, I chose to interpret it using the hermeneutical approach in combination with the theory “On Key Symbols” by anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner. I decided not to focus only on the socio-cultural perspective, but to expose myself to the deeper reflection of the phenomenon of understanding – taking the film as a projection between the projection on the screen and the film spectator.

There were two major questions I asked myself for the purpose of this research. Whether it was possible to use the theory “On Key Symbols” to interpret the film symbols and whether the combination with hermeneutical film analysis was suitable for a meaningful interpretation.

The first chapter covered two topics: hermeneutical film analysis and anthropological approach to symbolism. It provided the theoretical framework for interpretation and established how a film should be perceived – having in mind that film has multiple symbolic meanings that change over time.

The second chapter was a case study of the film themes – researching the symbolic structure of phenomena and applying the theory “On Key Symbols” to it. The case study was primarily focused on the pattern of religion and the themes connected to it: sacred symbolism, passage rites, liminality and shamanism.

I found that this interdisciplinary approach for film analysis opened great possibilities for understanding film. While hermeneutics and symbolic anthropology are compatible in research, the phenomena/objects they study are different. The experiment of searching the *key symbols* led me to the conclusion that it is possible to apply them to film in order to find meaning and connection to our world: to our symbolic systems, symbols, culture and its patterns. We can see this path of communication between the spectator and the themes of the film – a space where we can explore the symbolic content of values and beliefs, while perceiving the contradictory perspectives of the world we live in.

For example, the *sacred symbols* in the film functioned in multiple ways (being the object of worship, aggression or salvation) and they showed how fragmented society is. Sacred symbols offered multiple versions of interpretation depending on the scene and context in which they were used (such as the symbol of crucified Jesus Christ). For this reason, the interpretation of the summarising symbol was very valuable for my research.

The vision of success – the „*key action*“ – also corresponded with the transformation processes the film portrayed (transformation rites). On the other hand, it was difficult for me to unveil the meaning of the „*root metaphors*“ in the film story.

Overall, this research was prosperous in opening new possibilities, applying the theory “On Key Symbols” for the purpose of understanding the themes and symbolic system used in the film and perceiving these symbols in order to understand deeper structures of values. A part of hermeneutic standpoint is that any interpretation is intrinsically incomplete, including this interpretation of the film *The Holy Mountain*. Understanding that film expresses multiple symbolic meanings that change over time brings us to the conclusion that there is always the need for further reflection and interpretation of symbols and for continuation of the hermeneutic circle.

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