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ARCHAIC MOTIVES IN MODERN CINEMATOGRAPHY

Abstract

This paper deals with the topic of archaic moments in various aspects in modern cinema: based on the works of renowned psychologist C. G. Jung as well as modern experts such as A. F. Losev and M. Eliade, the author examines a wide range of modern films, with particular focus on the Hollywood films of the last several decades. Different genres of films portray different archaic stereotypes, with the action film portraying the archetypal hero, the melodrama portraying the nurturing wife and mother and the porn industry paralleling the cult orgies of the ancient times. Despite the similarities, it is shown that modern films, unlike ancient myths, reduce people to the role of absolute consumers.

Keywords: *modern cinematography, archaic motives, C. G. Jung, consumerism.*

CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY AND CINEMATOGRAPHY

Carl Gustav Jung once remarked that mythology can sing after death, like the severed head of Orpheus.¹ Indeed, among modern mythology experts, from A. F. Losev to M. Eliade, the claim that mythological consciousness is connected to the structural features of the human

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¹ К. Г. Юнг (1997), *Душа и миф*. Шесть архетипов, Киев-Москва, 15.

psyche and language is considered common today. It is also particularly connected with the presence of specific structures in the human subconscious: archetypes that determine our view of the world, i.e. why mythology is the basis for all other forms of culture – from art to philosophy. It is practically indelible from public consciousness. In other words, the strife of modern Western civilization toward creating a society based on purely rational foundations, whose view of the world would be desacralized and completely devoid of mythological features, is proven to be unfounded. Moreover, all attempts to completely build life according to the principles of rationality, abandoning thousands-of-years-old cultural heritage, which does not meet the criteria of scientism are doomed to failure. It only leads to the archaic, mythological layers of the human psyche taking their toll. Only now the myth does not become a universal reference factor between man and the world and a harmonizing factor of their relationship, but a destructive instance that justifies immorality and the lowest subconscious instincts. The most striking example of this is the appearance in quiet, orderly, emphatically methodical and rational, bourgeois National Socialist Germany – a purely irrational cultural phenomenon, in which mysticism and mythmaking were mixed. C. G. Jung believed German Nazism was the revenge of the Europeans for the exaggerated, crude and aggressive non-dialectical rationalism that was the basis of the values of the Enlightenment. Moreover, the same idea – about fascism as a natural result of the development of the Enlightenment paradigm – was put forward by other European scholars, for example, Adorno and Marcuse.

However, if the mythological background of Nazism is obvious, although I would not say that it has been adequately studied, the unveiling of the myth within the framework of liberal discourse seems to be somewhat suspect. And that, despite the fact that the same authoritative myth researchers, say – A. F. Losev, M. Eliade, have repeatedly stated that in the Western, democratic society there is a “niche” for myth, which for the average person in this society is a refuge from the total rationality of capitalism. It is mass culture: popular cinematography, commercials, various kinds of shows, television programs. Thus, Eliade talks about the mythological background of comic books, detective novels, car shows, emphasizing the myths of the super man, of the invincible policeman, etc., which grew out the “little man’s” dream of becoming a hero, an extraordinary personality.¹ I would like to draw

¹ See: М. Элиаде (2000), *Аспекты мифа*, М.: Академический Проект, 174-175.

attention to the mythological foundations of mass, popular cinema. At the same time, I do not intend to cross the boundaries of the etude. Therefore, of course, I do not pretend to the finality of the conclusions and the scientific presentation.

CINEMATOGRAPHY AND MYTHOLOGY

Only representatives of naive consciousness can believe movies simply “imitate” life. In fact, as experts in the field of semiotics say (primarily the Russian scientist Y. M. Lotman), film like any art has its own special language, a system of signs. Only a person who knows such a language can “decipher” the film and understand what its creators, screenwriter, director, cinematographers and actors, wanted to convey to the viewer.² The fact that a man of modern civilization does not think about the existence of a specific language of cinematography and that this statement itself can seem paradoxical to him, indicates only one thing: in the modern world, there are almost no people who do not understand this language. It is the ability to understand something as naturally as breathing that makes it go unnoticed. However, if we learned this language almost unconsciously, by immersing ourselves in the world of movies and television, then of course this does not mean we are dealing with a natural and self-explanatory code of communication. Y. M. Lotman tells how a girl from Siberia in the 1930s saw the comedy for the first time in Moscow: she was angry such “horrors” were openly shown – talking heads, severed arms and legs.³ This is a reaction of “a natural man” to film, which perceives what is shown on the screen in a direct and immediate way. A person who knows the language of cinema without explanation will understand that the presence of only one head in the frame means that the filmmakers wanted to draw the audience’s attention to this character. The image of the object acquires an additional meaning here. It turns into a sign: a “word” of the film language.

For all its invisibility, the language of cinema is very complex. Everything here has its own special meaning: the lighting of faces and figures, and the sequence of shots and the combination of music and images. Our topic does not include their detailed description. Those interested can view the work of Y. M. Lotman “Semiotics of cinematography and problems of cinematographic aesthetics” / “Семиотика кино и

² See: Ю. М. Лотман (1973), *Семиотика кино и проблемы киноэстетики*, Таллин: Ээсти Раамат

³ *Ibid.*

проблемы киноэстетики”. This work introduces the problem of semi-otic codes of cinematography. For us, only one comment of Y. M. Lotman is important here, about the connection between films and myth. It consists in the fact that both myth and cinema have an “intimate”, i.e. “personal” view of things.

According to A. F. Losev, one of the main characteristic features of the myth imbues with personal intuitions and symbols. First of all, a myth is a personal story, with the help of which the encounter between man and the world takes place. Through myth, man opens himself up to the world. The world, in turn, talks about itself.⁴ According to the appropriate definition of its creators, W. Paul and H. Wales, the film, “tells a story through the demonstration of moving images.”⁵ At the same time, I want to point out that film is interesting to us precisely because it presents a certain person’s point of view. According to the plot of the film, it is the main character or characters, and in reality, of course, it is the filmmakers. We should also mention the phenomenon of the transformation of famous film actors into mythological figures described by Y. M. Lotman. I believe, it is directly related to the original mythological nature of the film language.⁶ The same actor who plays different characters in different films unconsciously connects them into one artistic metatext. The viewer perceives these films as the story of one hero he loves. Moreover, it is easy to see that each film actor has his own role and he is easily identified with an archetype that goes back to the characters of mythology: the Warrior, the Seducer, the Ruler, etc. As a result, the mass consciousness begins to perceive them as pagan gods – with their own characters, adventures, special relationships with other gods (for example, S. Stallone and A. Schwarzenegger are clearly associated with the deities of war). The layman resolutely refuses to recognize someone similar to himself in the film actor. For him, the actor is a creature of another, film world. That world is transcendent, despite all its “earthly” features, which tabloid newspapers enjoy in full accordance with the “laws of the genre.” As paradoxical as it may sound, he did roughly the same thing as Homer. Undoubtedly, this can be the topic of a separate study, but here I would like to draw attention to another aspect of the

⁴ See: А. Ф. Лосев (1990), *Диалектика мифа*, Киев: Библиотека Фонда содействия развитию психической культуры

⁵ See: Ю. М. Лотман (1973), *Семиотика кино и проблемы киноэстетики*, Таллин: Ээсти Раамат, 316.

⁶ *Ibid.*

“mythology of cinema”: the presence in it of certain archaic mythological plots, depending on the genre.

It is interesting that in this case the main interest is not the works of prominent directors. Of course, these archetypes are also present there, but the focus here are commercial films that break through the creative individuality of the author. Precisely because of their low aesthetic value, mythological layers common to all and belonging to the “collective personality of humanity” come to the fore in them. But, of course, they are masked with the help of mass culture.

ARCHAIC MOTIFS IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMATOGRAPHY

Even an elementary analysis of a plot immediately shows that in the case of film in all its genres we encounter the “playing out” of various mythological plots connected with initiation. It is a test that re-births a person, makes him a different person who has the experience of communicating with a different, non-human reality. It brings him new, non-human abilities. Indeed, for example, the climax of any action movie is the rage of the main character, which gives him superhuman abilities: in this state, he alone destroys dozens and hundreds of armed enemies. Traditional culture also knows the phenomenon of “soldier madness”. The initiation of famous berserkers is based on that. We are talking about Northern European⁷ “men’s alliances.” Their members would bring themselves to a special furious state in which they would completely forget about self-preservation and go into battle naked or hiding behind animal skins. At the same time, they did not feel pain, did not know pity and ordinary human feelings. For example, they could pounce on an enemy and bite his throat. They believed that at that moment they were inhabited by the deity of war, as a rule, in correlation with the wolf. After such combat, the berserker was considered a dedicated man with special abilities that transcended profane experience.⁸

As we can see, the rage of the main characters of action films is very important. For example, the infamous John Rambo played by Stallone, essentially goes back to this archetype of individual military

⁷ This story is according to old Norse sources. Enraged berserker warriors were led by the god Odin himself and were identified with animals, most often a bear or even a wolf, whose skin they wore. (transl. note)

⁸ М. Элиаде (2002), *Тайные общества: обряды инициации и посвящения*, Киев-Москва, 218-219.

initiation. It does not seem unnatural to the viewer that Rambo without apparent difficulties kills his enemies one by one. It is because the viewer unconsciously perceives him no longer as a person, although he is a professional soldier of a high class. The hero becomes an embodiment of the Ideal Warrior, a mythical character who defeats the infernal monster and establishes universal order. By the way, the names of some heroes almost openly point to, for example, the "Universal Soldier". Sometimes this typical plot is supplemented by the fact that the main character is also a dead man. He was "resurrected" by scientists in their laboratories, to turn him into an unstoppable "killing machine." Here we see a very accurate reproduction of the "logic of initiation." Because to become a wolf-warrior, able to go beyond the framework of profane human experience and merge with the mythological characters from the primordial, sacred time, the neophyte must first die symbolically. At the same time, as was indicated, every initiation presupposes a new birth through death. It is not strange that a person gets a different name after initiation.

On the contrary, melodrama is built around the relationship between mother and child. There is always a motif of love that overcomes all obstacles, the loss of a child and its acquisition (let's recall the Latin American television series: "The Rich Also Cry", "The Slave Isaura", "Land of Love", etc.). It is easy to see it is a repetition of the plot of typically female initiations that aim to reveal a specific, female spiritual experience and are associated with fertility cults and natural cycles. Moreover, one of the main characteristics of such initiations is they do not include myths about supernatural beings and the beginning of time, like male initiations. They are closed, so to speak, on the sacredness set in nature itself.⁹ In melodramas we also encounter a similar situation: the whole plot is based on the personal relationships of several people, and the political, social, cultural context is simply "cut off." This characteristic of "soap opera" has almost become an anecdote, but its true meaning is usually not understood.

Finally, the pornographic film clearly reproduces the cult of the orgies. Indeed, in these films, the main characters are not actors at all, but organs of the "human bottom." There is also a construction of provisions in which all taboos arising from the social "alter-ego" are removed. Let's remember the comic elevation of the "human bottom", and the abolition of prohibitions are indispensable characteristics of the carnival.

⁹ М. Элиаде (2002), *Тайные общества: обряды инициации и посвящения*, Киев-Москва, 203.

Finally, we cannot but say a few words about the new phenomenon of mass culture, which has a distant connection to feature films – game shows. Most of them are also built on the exploitation of mythological archetypes, dating back as far as fairy tales. For example, the popular show on Russian television “Field of Wonders / Поле чудес” openly recreates with the help of mass culture the story of a treasure guarded by a wizard or a monster. The hero can claim only if he solves a few puzzles. In fact, the very name “Field of Wonders” aims to, so to speak, transport the viewer to a different and unusual mythical reality. We can only add to this that such fairy tales themselves are built on more archaic foundations – the features of the initiatory cult. A wizard or a monster here has pronounced monstrous qualities. They are thought of as beings belonging to another, previous cycle of the universe, which means that they are positioned as the beginnings of chaos in the current aeon. The hero’s victory over him, in fact, means the birth of a new world, including the new birth of himself as a person with a higher ontological status.

In general, it should be noted that the very idea of wealth as the best prize, which is typical of these game shows, goes far beyond the ordinary propaganda of the capitalist value system, about which the Russian opposition media write so much. Let’s take into account that in capitalist society money also has a special religious, sacred meaning and it goes back to Protestant ethics with its idea of wealth as a sign of soteriological choice. It immediately become clear that the possession of money here is unconsciously perceived as an increase in spiritual status. And now let’s remember that spiritual growth is associated with overcoming obstacles. “Swimming in the sea of chaos” is nothing but one of the most important threads of initiation.

ANTI-TRADITION OF THE MASS CULT

However, one should not think that civic mass culture carries elements of the reconstruction of traditional consciousness and worldview. On the contrary, before us are parodies of initiations, and this once again confirms Guenon’s characterization of capitalism as a society of anti-tradition. In other words, a degenerate and pathological society that, without realizing it, lives off the perversion and exploitation of the ancient, traditional social institution and ideological structure. Indeed, the plot of a film or a game show is obviously not about spiritual death and resurrection, which are the essence of every initiation. All the mentioned

parallels are nothing more than allusions caused by the mythological nature of film language and human psychology. At the same time, the viewer is generally positioned here as a passive person who only perceives what is happening but does not participate in it in any way. Moreover, at least on a rational level, the viewer is aware he is exposed to fiction and that the film actor is not a real person living through real difficulties. It is clear initiation presupposes something opposite: the active participation of the person himself and his sincere belief that what is happening does not have an allegorical, different meaning. But it is a sacred action taking place in reality, here and now. Finally, film and game shows, as if transferring a person to a different, "unusual" reality actually "keeps" him within the limits of that same mental universe of capitalism with its characteristic ideological principles of competition, individualism and the pursuit of wealth. These are films about the Vietnam War or a magical "Field of Wonders" where money is obtained very easily. On the contrary, initiation is aimed at conveying a superhuman, sacred reality to this world: to some edge of the forest or the bank of a river, where it can reveal the mystery of the creation of the universe. Moreover, mass culture at the same time not only completely binds man to the profane world of capitalism, but also nurtures specific worldview principles and behavioral reactions in it. As you can see, mass culture is not only an ugly product of this society. It is also its propaganda tool, aimed at consolidating and escalating the consumer mood and creating artificial needs. Through them, man loses his spiritual multidimensionality and increasingly becomes the object of manipulation by the controlling authorities of a "non-terrorist totalitarian" society, as Herbert Marcuse defines capitalism.

With some external similarity, traditional initiation and modern mass culture are completely opposite in their effect on man. The ancient man, who had undergone military initiation, had truly become a fearless warrior. The modern man who "swallows" war movies, as a rule, remains a notorious, controlled layman. He is often incapable of elementary self-defense, but with a remote consciousness that is easily enraged, developing ugly aggression. The ancient woman who passed through the typical female initiation was aware of her gender and the functions associated with it as a cosmic mystery and strove to conform to the archetypes of the ideal woman and mother. The modern housewife is a TV series fan who abandons housework for the fictional, clumsy

“life collisions” of Marianas and Marios. Finally, the ancient maenads,¹⁰ who participated in the orgy cult discovered within themselves the mysterious element of fertility that pervades the entire Universe. They sought to merge in ecstasy with the universe of all living beings. And the modern layman is a fan of pornographic movies who harbors only complexes related to the sexual sphere. At the same time, closed in the world of virtual and fantasy, he risks generally losing the ability to engage in normal sexual behavior.

Thus, the myths set forth in modern mass culture have completely different functions than the myths of archaic societies. Frankly, they are not safe for humans. Resisting them is not only possible but also necessary. Otherwise, the transformation into a degenerate “absolute consumer” with a broken and controlled psyche is inevitable. And for this you must learn to decipher the “texts” of postmodern culture, in whatever form they appear: articles on economics, architectural endeavors for bank buildings or commercial films and popular television shows.

Translated by Dajana Lazarević

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¹⁰ Maenads come from Greek myths, as companions of the god Dionysus. They made festivities in his honor, which necessarily ended with night orgies. Their activities are known today as “Bacchanalia” (after the Roman god Bacchus, the counterpart of Dionysus). (transl. note)