

Conference Paper

Mithopoetic Aspects in Contemporary Screen Culture

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Abstract

The article explores «the hero's journey» – a universal mythological formula widely used in the cinema – as it is applied to the film «The Return» by A. Zvyagintsev.

Myth here is seen as a way in which the author (director) expresses his concept, as well as a frame through which the reality and the individual destiny are perceived. It is a new mythology that has its origins within archaic and classical mythology, but also absorbs the entire spectrum of current sociocultural transformations.

Keywords: screen culture, media, art film, mythopoeia, monomyth, hero's journey

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1. Introduction

The understanding of the mythopoetic potential of the screen culture is relevant to the current transformation of the system of human material, cultural and spiritual values unfolding against the backdrop of the turn of the century informational explosion. Current worldview shifts rapidly towards the culture of entertainment, consumption and uninterrupted communication, which inevitably leads us away from the classical culture of cultivation and enlightenment towards the unfettered reign of the compensatory culture of leisure and entertainment.

This culture of entertainment became the man foundation that grounded the emergence of screen (audiovisual) culture, a form of mass culture combining visual images with sounds. By creating an illusion of reality, screen culture (primarily cinema), built on the rules of mythology, becomes a modelling system that deeply transforms and governs the audience's consciousness according to the prevailing political, ideological or cultural demands. Moreover, according to N. Kirillova, "the representation of social myth is especially obvious in screen culture" [5, p. 1146].

Screen is a highly successful medium of communication and cultural construction, which has received a worldwide distribution. In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes wrote that "myth constitutes a communicative system, a message. This means that myth cannot be a thing, a concept or an idea; it is a form, a means of signification" [1, p. 265].

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The narrow niche of “art cinema” utilizes the myth’s communicative function in its entirety producing a new and creatively re-evaluated work that becomes an integral part of contemporary mediaculture. Art cinema becomes “inscribed” in the minds and hearts of the viewers; however, it lacks moralizing, does not reinforce stereotypes of thought and behavior, does not provide ready-made answers but always raises the questions.

2. Methods

Since the object of this paper is a widely cinematically popular universal mythological formula of a “hero’s journey”, here the methods of analysis and synthesis are used to interpret the film *The Return* by the famous Russian director Andrei Zvyagintsev. Generalizing and comparative historical methods are used to explore the mythological structure analyzed in detail by the American writer and producer Christopher Vogler [2].

3. Discussion

The concept of a “hero’s journey” is widely accepted; it was used by many famous film directors: G. Lucas, F. Coppola, S. Spielberg. The main advantage of the Vogler’s model is that it resonates with life cycles and is based on psychologically realistic phenomena, on the unconscious primal fears and joys which our ancestors expressed in fairy-tales and legends and which are still being retold in literature and in film [2, p. 7].

Christopher Vogler has analyzed and applied for a cinematic medium the ideas expressed by American anthropologist Joseph Campbell, who synthesized multiple myths and folk tales revealing their parallel structures and a remarkable set of fundamental truths that he described in his book *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* [6]. He also introduced a concept of “monomyth”: a recurring mythological structure that frames the journey and the life of a hero and can be subjected to endless variations.

It can be demonstrated that the perennial theme of folklore and world literature – the myth of a hero’s journey – is also found in the film by A. Zvyagintsev. A. Zvyagintsev repeatedly analyses the original mythological perception and reflection of reality using the archaic and Christian traditions.

Going back to the Christopher Vogler’s structure, we can see that it describes a mythological model of a hero’s journey, which consists of twelve steps constituting a universal invariable framework that reflects the details of every story told in literature and in film.

First Act (Departure):

1. The Ordinary World
2. The Call to Adventure
3. Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting with the Mentor
5. Crossing the First Threshold

Second Act (Initiation)

6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies
7. Approach to the Innermost Cave
8. The Ordeal
9. Reward

Third Act (Return)

10. The Road Back
11. The Resurrection
12. Return with the Elixir

Symbols may differ according to a concrete story, social demands or cultural characteristics. The core of this structure is formed by the values of the hero's journey, an internal journey performed by mind, heart and soul. As for the conclusions, they run similar to the ideas of Swiss psychologist K. G. Jung, who created a theory of archetypes – recurring images that reappear in people's dreams and in all world mythologies.

In A. Zvyagintsev's *The Return* the heroes are two brothers, Andrei and Ivan. Their serene life is broken by a sudden, almost magical re-appearance of their father: an event that provokes multiple questions and different reactions from the two brothers. Leaving the habitual and cozy world of their mother's house, they accept a challenge of an unknown external world and follow their father in the journey to a desolate island. "Here the theme is a metaphysical journey of the soul from mother to father," – says the director. "That is, from the material, bodily sphere to the heavens. A spiritual movement. For me the *The Return* is a model of human's relationships with God. I mean Ivan and Andrei, two human beings who experience an initiation ritual in different ways [7, c. 20].

The climax of the journey usually comes when the hero meets a mentor, a wiseman whose advices help the hero to overcome the fear of unknown, the trials and nightmares of an incredible journey. Such a symbolical model of the hero meeting the mentor (father) can also be found in *The Return*. The relationships between the father and his sons are difficult, they face psychological conflicts, clash of characters, hurt and ambitions. “It is already enough to understand that the father is not simply a human being who has returned to his family many years later... He comes to his sons not by chance, but with a goal and, after fulfilling his mission, he leaves this world...” [4, p. 129].

Andrei and Ivan reach the age of initiation; their initiation is the return of the father, the travel, the initiation ritual.

In the Second act (Initiation), while travelling through the labyrinth of events, learning the rules of this alien world and answering its challenges, the heroes evolve going from one state to another, experiencing despair and hope, weakness and strength, love and hate. “Based on this, the story of the father and his sons in *The Return* can be interpreted as initiation: the entire journey is full of trials and preparations, the transmission of knowledge (knowledge how to find food in an unfamiliar city; how to order in a restaurant; how to call a waitress and pay; how to survive an emergency – return the stolen car and punish the evildoers; extract the car that has become stuck; coat the boat with tar; paddle during the rain; put up the tents; make fire; make a wooden bowl etc.).Furthermore, it is the transformation of consciousness required to become a fully functioning human...” [4, p. 132].

Following the rules of mono-myth, in the Third act (Return), after enduring cruel and harsh ordeals, having met or overcome death, the hero returns to his point of departure, i.e. the home. The hero’s road has irrevocably changed him, the break with the previous life is complete, now he is irreversibly facing a new life.

The return is the culmination of the hero’s journey and the culmination of Zvyagintsev’s movie. During the six days Andrei and Ivan experienced an incredible journey: they left their mother’s house for the first time, found their lost father, got to know him, and then suddenly and tragically lost him. They faced the new emotions and events, experienced complex stages of transformation requiring shifts not only in their consciousness but in their unconscious mind. The heroes came through the initiation ritual, they were, in essence, reborn, and now they return back to the ordinary world: the circle of the hero’s journey is complete.

Undoubtedly, the text of this film is deep and highly complex, but this is what creates an inspiring novelty, this is what attracts the audience. The director forces the viewers

to think, to penetrate the mysteries, to savor the slowly unfolding story of his film, to improve their tastes and to exercise their minds.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, it is evident that either consciously or unconsciously the director utilized the concept of the hero's journey as the main structuring device of the film. This narrative model, enriched with the authorial meanings, leads the viewers on an impressive journey and then returns them to themselves. The evidence for this can be found in the director's words: "The kind of viewer more important for me is not the one coming out in tears or visibly moved, but the one with a pale face, with the eyes looking inward. Because then I know that something had happened to this person. Something made a powerful impact on him. It is as if he has shifted from a fixed point" [7, p. 23]. Therefore, a skillful use of mythopoetic aspects in contemporary art film is one of the most interesting creative approaches in Russian screen culture.

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