

Doctor Parnassus's Imaginarium: A Collage of Literary Topoi

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Article History

Received: 03.04.2021

Accepted: 09.04.2021

Published: 14.04.2021



Abstract: Setting out from the study dedicated by Umberto Eco to the *Casablanca* movie ("*Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage*, 1985), whose success has been explained by the use of cinematic clichés of great popularity, offering a successful recipe in numerous other cases, this essay identifies recurrent motifs of world literature in the film *L'Imaginarium du Docteur Parnassus*, directed by Terry Gilliam (2009) and written by Gilliam and Charles McKeown, as well as the mechanism that guided their articulation in one of the most ingenious artifacts that pay homage to the power of imagination. The effect of imitation and repetition is the deconstruction of myths into stereotypes, a process which can be noticed both in western and in eastern postmodernism. Our cases in point serving as arguments are provided here by an Indian TV series, *Sasural Simar Ka*, and Gilliam's 2009 drama film.

Keywords: *Doctor Parnassus*, cult movies, stereotypes, specular abyss

Introduction

Inspired by the study dedicated by Umberto Eco to cultural stereotypes in the *Casablanca* drama film, whose success is explained by the montage of cinematic clichés of great popularity, which became a recipe for success ("*Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage*," 1985), our essay is searching the *'Imaginarium du Docteur Parnassus*, directed by Terry Gilliam (2009) and written by Gilliam and Charles McKeown, for motifs of world literature which are manipulated to the same effect: commercial success. The complex mode of the articulation of clichéd topoi, however, makes it one of the most ingenious artifacts that pay homage to the power of imagination. The owner of a troupe of itinerant actors, looking as if they had been resurrected from times of old, offers spectators the opportunity to enter the universe of their dreams through a magic mirror. The fulfillment of the dream has a price which is to be assessed by the beneficiaries themselves. The owner of a troupe of itinerant actors, reminiscent of medieval French players, offers the public the opportunity to enter the universe of their dreams, passing through a magic mirror. As Dr. Parnassus is hundreds of years old, his representations reflect all eras, from the Middle Ages to the present day¹. A pageant of literary motifs is thus set in motion, whose

¹Samuel Hadida, *L'Imaginarium du Docteur Parnassus*, p. 28, article available online at <https://medias.unifrance.org/medias/249/158/40697/presse/l-imaginarium-du-docteur-parnassus-carpeta-de-prensa-ingles.pdf>, accessed 01.05.2020.

referential dimension is subverted by repetition and mutual reflection. The mythical content is emptied out and replaced by stereotyped meanings generated by a mechanical signifying practice. How is full meaning to be told apart from simulacrum? A distinction made by Yulia Yurchenko (Yurchenko 2018) between essential, schematic representation and empty linguistic sign (social stereotype) comes in handy at this point:

Les deux principes, ou compréhensions, (a) le stéréotype en tant que représentation conventionnelle, schématique de l'objet, (b) le stéréotype en tant que « suite ouverte (c'est-à-dire non finie) d'énoncés » associée à une unité lexicale¹, affectent l'un comme l'autre à la fois le cadre conceptuel et l'expression linguistique matérielle.

Cependant, les recherches dans le cadre de ces deux approches scientifiques vont, si l'on peut dire, dans des directions opposées : (a) de l'idée abstraite du sujet à l'ensemble de ses expressions linguistiques matérielles ; (b) du signe linguistique à la découverte de sa signification – des « phrases stéréotypées », des connotations, de l'intension.² (Yurchenko 2018: 267)

With myths, the pre-constructed idea guarantees full presence. The event *illo tempore* is ritualistically repeated in successive ages, but each new enactment of the sacred scene is legitimated by the revelatory original icon and cointense in meaning. Unlike myth, a stereotype is a social construction, which may be the embodiment of knowledge acquired through repeated experience of the same type of action, or, fully deconstructed as a signifier sliding under an open series of signifieds.

The stereotype of Indian movies trying to “endorse the social, religious, and cultural values of the Hindu middle class” is contradicted by late challenges from the young generation committed to liberalism and globalization, according to Amit Ranjan (“Construing the Indian Middle-Class Ideology,” 2019). Stereotyped characters and scenes are the main stuff of soap-operas, meant for broad public consumption, where each successful attempt is preceded by a prayer, commitments in love are “eternal,” and a wife’s justified reproaches of neglect and abuse thrown in her husband’s face are justified by her temporary insanity or the effect of magic or hypnotism. Nevertheless, the influence of postmodern deconstructionist ideas and signifying practices can also be traced in films broadcasted by a conservative TV film industry. Isles of self-reflexivity, when characters are ironically emphatic about their not being actors in a movie, interrupt the web of illusionary realist devices and strategies. Disbelief is often stealing into the script, subverting the ideological drift of the heavy religious drama. Deities are called to account for failing to protect their most devoted believers, or their existence itself is indirectly questioned (see chapter play number 564 of *Sasural Simar Ka*³, when Simar speaks in answer to an imaginary spectator

² The two principles, or understandings, (a) the stereotype as a conventional, schematic representation of the object, (b) the stereotype as an "open (ie unfinished) series of statements" associated with a lexical unit, both affect both the conceptual framework and the material linguistic expression.

However, research under these two scientific approaches goes, so to speak, in opposite directions: (a) from the abstract idea of the subject to all of its material linguistic expressions; (b) from the linguistic sign to the discovery of its meaning - "stereotypical phrases", connotations, intension.

³ *Sasural Simar Ka* (Simar's in-laws), an Indian television series, premiered on 25 April 2011 (Colors TV). Producer: Rashmi Sharma Telefilms

who mocks the credulity of those who suspend their disbelief over the existence of snakes which change their form, turning, for instance, into a beautiful but fatal woman: “If gods exist, then we must admit the existence of evil as well.” Gods are either non-existent or morally flawed, if they are named by a signifier which includes its negated other.)

Sasural Simar Ka makes extensive reference to India’s mythology but taking liberties with the canonical text. Myths are deconstructed into simulacra, copies without original, or stereotypes emptied out of the original sacred significance. Simar’s abduction by lawyer Vikrant, for instance, and her husband’s search for her are compared to the abduction of Sita by Ravana, King of Demons, and the confrontation between her husband, Rama, and Ravana as narrated in the *Ramayana*. Vikrant’s head appears multiplied in his delusionary vision, but so is Prem’s body, which has no correspondent in the epic. Ravana’s ten heads (Fig. 1) are not a random feature, but an amount of qualities which define the demon’s identity: Kama (lust), Krodha (anger), Moha (delusion), Lobha (greed), Mada (pride), Maatsyasya (envy), Manas (mind), Buddhi (intellect), Chitta (will) and Ahamkara (the ego). By contrast, Sita’s husband, Rama, borrows his identity from God Vishnu, whose avatar he is. Prem’s multiplied body in the movie is, therefore, a correlative of Vikrant’s multiplied heads (Fig,2,3), but deprived of the legitimacy conferred by the mythological precedent.



Fig. 1: Ravana of Ramayata



Fig. 2-3 Prem confronting Vikrant/ Ravana in *Sasural Simar Ka* (movie serial number 533)



Fig, 2: Prem's multiplied body (*Sasural Simar Ka*, movie serial number 533)

Western art objects which resort to stereotypes are abundant in the context of the refutation of logocentrism and the rise of the philosophy of language which spells out its indeterminacy. Mythology has long yielded its place to simulacra, to endless differentiation from origin or, as Yurchenko says, to an open series of signifiers to which indefinite and even incongruent signifieds are attached. Such is *L'Imaginarium du Docteur Parnassus*, directed by Terry Gilliam (2009) and written by Gilliam and Charles McKeown, a collection of cultural stereotypes centred on the Faustian covenant with the devil motif.

The film opens with an induction whose Spatio-temporal framework is built by generic diegetic pointers (tonight, here) of a vague Spatio-temporal frame characteristic of fairy tales (out of historical time and space).

The beginning of the action, in the dark, brings to the stage Parnassus, an old doctor (over a thousand years old), whose power lies in controlling the mind. He can stir the spectators' imagination, serving as their guide to unprecedented worlds. He keeps changing masks behind which there is no true face, no stable identity. His mock-heroic play with mythology starts with Mercury or Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the initiator of mortals into their secrets:

ANTON / MERCURY (CONT'D): Doctor Parnassus ... as old as time ... has the power to empower the mind. Let Doctor Parnassus open your imagination. Let him transport you to worlds you've never dreamed of ... If you dare. The choice is yours and yours alone. Transcend the heights on Beauty's wing .. ”⁴.

The action of the film is running on two levels: a narrative of the lives of Doctor Parnassus and his companions, and a pageant of magical worlds whose brief shows are performed on stage⁵. Access to

⁴Terry Gilliam, Charles McKeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimagariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

⁵ See Hadida, *L'Imaginarium du Docteur Parnassus*, p.28, article available online on <https://medias.unifrance.org/medias/249/158/40697/presse/l-imaginarium-du-docteur-parnassus-carpeta-de-prensa-ingles.pdf>, accessed 01.05.2020.

them comes at a price: "How much do you value your dreams?"⁶, those who agree to join the game are asked. The mirror is fashioned like a mystery, the Doctor's working tool in controlling minds:



Fig. 4: *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*: the dismantling of the myth of Genesis

The Journey to the World of Dreams is priced at five pounds at the beginning of the film, the marketing agency advertising it as the best deal on Earth:

PERCY: Take a ticket and join the queue! Only five quid a go! No bigger bargain while planet earth lasts!"⁷.

The world in which the characters move is presented as a magical one, it is only that they do not have eyes to see it, Parnassus lending them his vision. There is no enlightenment to be gained, such as Alice's during her journeys in Wonderland or through the mirror. Parnassus, the mythical seat of the Muses, is now the name of a phony divinity telling a story of our times: senseless, amoral, with creation degraded to the simple perpetuation of the act of existence, lacking teleology and intelligibility. Dr. Parnassus claims to be telling the "Eternal Story", without which the Universe would have ceased to exist:

DR. PARNASSUS: A different story! A saga .. a romance ... a tale of an unforeseen death. Tragic or comic .. it doesn't matter. It's sustaining the universe! That's why we're still here. You can't stop stories being told! You can't be everywhere!"⁸.

The idea of existence generated by a dream or word is present in many mythical matrices, such as Shiva's dream in Hinduism, God's word brings the universe into being in the Bible, while magic words trigger states and events in various popular superstitions. Parnassus's story is actually an anti-creation, the same idea being suggested by the movie photography. The elements of the biblical genesis – darkness versus light, cosmos versus chaos – tell a different story, of the indifferent mix of mythical opposites,

⁶Terry Gilliam, Charles Mckeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimaginariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

⁷Terry Gilliam, Charles Mckeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimaginariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

⁸Terry Gilliam, Charles Mckeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimaginariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

with lightening (reminding of Jove or the biblical God punishing the rebel angels) replacing creative light (Fig. 4)

Nick, a devil of sorts, challenges Parnassus to a bet which is actually a trap. His first “Labour” is to attract twelve disciples – the reverse of Christ’s twelve apostles -, and the bet is won by Parnassus because he was endowed with the power of imagination. His prize becomes a torment, as eternal life is merely the perpetuation of a hellish condition:

DOCTOR PARNASSUS: (VO) My prize ... The thing I most coveted ... (a voice full of horror) was ever-lasting life ”⁹.

In the universe controlled by Parnassus, people are always at a crossroads, having to choose the right path in order to escape "the path of honor of Master Parnassus" ¹⁰. Drinking is the path of perdition for the first man to enter the Imaginary, he kicking Heaven at the sight of a beer. It can be considered that any person who enters that world represents an alter ego of the doctor, he not knowing in his youth to choose the right path, to run away from the path of the devil instead of negotiating with him. He can be likened to a profane hero, a novice who has to take up a path of initiation in order to mature.

The entry into another universe through the mirror is a widespread motif in fairy tales as well as in fantasy literature, to which Parnassus adds a pact with the devil. Immortality, however, Parnassus' dream, becomes a curse gnawing at the roots of his life: “DR. PARNASSUS (agitated, ignoring her): Why does everybody want to live forever? Immortality’s a bloody curse” ¹¹. Reckless desires and the exchange of immortality between gods and earthlings figured in Greek mythology are often rewritten wrong in the postmodern age of semiotic transfers and derealising repetitions which turn full signifiers into the dead language of stereotypes. The film is situated at the border between the madness of reality and the fantasy of the modern world, as Gilliam defined it in an interview with Derek Malcolm¹².

The covenant of Parnassus with the devil is reminiscent of Dr. Faust’s similar decision to sell his soul in exchange for infinite knowledge (repetition of original sin) and delights. The fact that Parnassus is also called a doctor, a doctor of dreams, strengthens the association with the hero launched for the first time into public space by an anonymous medieval book (*Das Faustbuch*). Another fold of the ontological transfer concerns the space of representation. Parnassus is an avatar of Prospero, who acts on three ontological levels: the magical universe ruled by Ariel, the historical world of an Italy famous for the plots of the aristocracy, and the world of the stage, where he finally reveals himself as a playwright.

⁹Terry Gilliam, Charles Mckeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimaginariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

¹⁰Terry Gilliam, Charles Mckeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimaginariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

¹¹Terry Gilliam, Charles Mckeown, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, scenario available online at <http://thenutgallery.com/scripts/theimaginariumofdoctorparnassus.pdf>, accessed 30.05.2020.

¹²Jake Crinion(2015),*The Imaginarium of Terry Gilliam*, article available online at https://esource.dbs.ie/bitstream/handle/10788/2479/ba_crinion_j_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y , accessed 04.05.2020

The tragic event of the death of the main actor during the production of the movie released what Gilliam called a call to quantum: for the scenes to be filmed, three different actors were used, appearing as Parnassus / Heath Ledger me-copies in parallel universes accessed through the mirror. The reality turned out to be fragile, ending in a sham. Unlike the mirror as a traditional trope of the imagination or as access to another ontological order, the mirror of Parnassus is a surface without depth, an empty image, which no longer suggests any transcendence beyond it. Through proliferation and unseemly combination, literary motifs block each other's meaning, becoming a collection of simulacra, defined by Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981), as an abyss of signs that do not reflect any reality, but only other signs, satisfying the consumer's need for consumption of entertaining shows. The artificiality of the present age justifies its characterization as “hyperreality,” born of the destabilizing merger of things and artifacts/ images.

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