

**MYTHOLOGIZING THE POLITICAL GESTURE,
A VECTOR OF MYTH PERPETUATION
IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY.**

THE DANCE OF REALITY AND ALEJANDRO
JODOROWSKY

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Abstract: An unusual common element of the secular society of the 20th century is the mythologization of the political gesture, in both the space of communist identity and the one in which different forms of Athenian democracy have been perpetuated until today. *The Dance of Reality* (2013), the film of Chilean director Alejandro Jodorowski captures and artistically transposes this mutation of community metaphysics from the area of religion to that of politics. By analysing two emblematic scenes from Jodorowski's film using concepts underlying Mircea Eliade's myth theory, the article aims to investigate the process by which contemporary society creates new mythical landmarks in the secular space, by mythologizing the political gesture with the help of mythologizing act storytelling.

Keywords: Alejandro Jodorowsky, myth, nations, mythologization of political gesture, sacred space, mythologizing act, contemporary society.

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Surrealism, rarely addressed in contemporary cinema, is part of the essence of film as art. From the distant days of the silent film, the surrealist discourse entered into direct controversy with the obvious vocation of cinema to faithfully reproduce reality. Man Ray, Buñuel, Dalí, or Germaine Dulac challenged the visual syntax using poetry to *shatter* the ossified texture of life captured on film. With the improvement of cinematographic methods of filming and projection, especially after the discovery of sound film, cinema realism will almost completely banish any influence of the abstract arts. However, Surrealism will discover new ways to insert itself into cinematic construction and will target something other than the actual structure of language. Once Eisenstein postulated the rules of classical montage, since the industry had standardized the mode of expression and communication through cinema, any other interference was firmly eliminated. It seemed the end of the burst of creativity generated by this fascinating technical invention of the early 20th century. Somehow, however, surrealism has returned to cinema, and although it does so sporadically, it amends the inherently realistic visuality of the frame by managing to denounce its artificiality.

Modern cinematic surrealism relies on the effect of filmed theatre, that is, the set and mise-en-scène of theatrical origin are recorded as realistic elements by the camera. The visual aesthetics thus obtained is in perfect coherence with a society taken over by the daily political spectacle, which, beginning with the

Bolshevik October Revolution, developed together with the cinema. Theatrical realities conveyed through film are the appearances of politicians, their speeches, and support demonstrations. The tribune, the placards and the collective character of the supporters organize a playful setting for any political demonstration. Everything is orchestrated around the rostrum where the hero of the occasion delivers his speech seasoned with stage interpretation tricks – from studied gestures to intonation and rhythm – just like a professional actor in front of his audience. The purpose of this representation is not at all innocent, it aims to elude any other reality and, mainly, the vital one recognizable to the human senses. The intended and often achieved result is to keep groups of people in a kind of captivity in the fascination of the Spectacle.

The elimination of official religions from the leaders' tribune, under the pretext of secularization, brings on the history stage a new type of relationship between leaders and communities (in our case, nations), a relationship defined by the need to worship (specific to many) and by the obligation to make a legendary gesture (for those who will be chosen at the head of the many). We are witnessing a moment unique in definition and scope in the history of human societies when, out of a desire to escape the mystical attraction, community life becomes, in itself, the embodiment of the mythological act. A fresh voice was needed, although it belongs to a senior of the cinematographic art, coming from a culture of European origin, yet developed in distant lands; the vision that has the advantage of distance, but also the commitment of hot temper, was necessary; the presence of the film written and directed by the Chilean Alejandro Jodorowsky was mandatory in order to transpose the turmoil of Europe into a more comprehensive image and thus more clarifying for everything that *is happening to us*.

The Dance of Reality tells the story of a small Chilean businessman, a Jewish immigrant from Ukraine who, radicalized by communist ideology, submits his life and family to an existence with Christic resonances aimed at discovering a kind of communal metaphysics, a higher meaning of social life capable of bringing salvation to all people. Jaime first exerts his doctrinal fanaticism on the family, terrorizing his son and assaulting his wife. Then, he will follow his destiny in a larger context, at the peak of Chilean power, when he decides to assassinate the leader of the state but ends up being arrested and tortured. He will return home similarly to Odysseus, scarred to mutilation by the bloody game of power and survival.

The Dance of Reality has been heavily commented on as an autobiographical film, and the personal elements that Jodorowsky brought to the story have been extensively discussed in press articles. For this reason, many aspects, of disturbing depth, have been left in the shadows. The film is definitely an aesthetic manifesto of surrealism in modern cinema and a great political film.

From the very beginning of the film, the poor childhood home is ruled by the icon-painting of Comrade Stalin. When Jodorowsky chooses to brutally join the space of the church with that of the street, building in two emblematic sequences, impressive moments of collective ecstasy, *The Dance of Reality* becomes more than an art film. It stands in what the *mythologizing act of storytelling means*, that is, the very creation of a mythical landmark, as Eliade explains:

... the church shares in an entirely different space from the buildings that surround it. Within the sacred precincts the profane world is transcended. On the most archaic levels of culture this possibility of transcendence is expressed by various *images of an opening*; here, in the sacred enclosure, communication with the gods is made possible; hence there must be a door to the world above, by which the gods can descend to earth and man can symbolically ascend to heaven. (...) this was the case in many religions; properly speaking, the temple constitutes an opening in the upward direction and ensures communication with the world of the gods. Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different (Eliade, 1959, pp. 25-26).

According to all the rules postulated by Eliade, the sacred space is for Jodorowsky the enclosure dedicated to ecstatic moments, but it is not limited to the church space, and spreads on the streets of the city infected by the fever of ideologies. Thus, the Chilean director emphasizes the surprising coherence between the secular manifestation of the sacred organized by religion and the invocation of the same sacred in the public space through political actions. We propose to study these two sequences, present in the film on the wandering route of the hero to assassinate the Chilean dictator. The first sequence is preceded, like a prologue, by the moment with obvious references to Christ's biography, in which our hero will learn a trade from an old carpenter. Although, prey to a paresis in both hands, he will manage to work on polishing the one hundred chairs needed for the church in the city. By teaching him his trade, the carpenter don Jose (the name is also not chosen by chance, Jose, Joseph in Spanish and Portuguese) also instils in him his own philosophy of life, marked by faith and generosity towards others. This Chilean Joseph will also lead him inside the church under the pretext

of delivering the one hundred chairs, where Jaime will attend a religious service, atypical for the European viewer, regardless of him being Catholic, through the explosion of joy of the community in songs dedicated to glorifying God.

But what does this church of joy look like in Jodorowsky's representation? We are in a dilapidated building with peeling paint on the walls and broken stone tiles. From place to place, in the groves, where the icons should be, the space is covered by long curtains, down to the ground. The participants to the service are simple people, in modern attire, without any restrictive element of the many practiced by religions. Only the sign of the cross rises hugely in place of the altar and becomes the only Christian element. This church stripped of the insignia of its various factions speaks to the origins of Christianity and its primary purpose: the invocation of divinity. Besides, the connection with metaphysics happens. Don Jose dies suddenly, right in the middle of the ritual. His death appears as a long-awaited sealing of the link between earth and heaven, as material evidence of the manifestation of the intensely sacred invoked in the place of worship. The priest is, as before, a true director of events. He translates for the community the meaning of what has happened and suggests the right attitude. Don Jose's death can be nothing but a new reason to rejoice and glorify God. Moreover, the whole sequence has a manifest theatricality. Cinematic frames are, shall we say, *utilitarian*. They do not comment, but only reproduce, sometimes even clumsily, the events. The *mise-en-scène* betrays a concept that goes beyond the limits of the frame, betrays the theatre, the monolithic composition, horizontally conforming to the two-dimensional frame of the stage.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Jaime exits the church only to find himself involved in another type of collective summoning. On the street is the Nazi crowd chanting anti-Semitic slogans instead of Slavic songs. Some notable differences can be seen between the two spaces. If there were no icons or sculptures in the place of worship, outside, the outer walls of the houses lining the street are loaded with the same poster promoting the face of the Nazi leader. In stark contrast, the group of believers has a motley appearance, with people wearing various outfits of everyday life, while the Nazi demonstrators are almost identical and uniformed in the insignia of the political ideology they support. Demonstrators wear masks. Faces covered in this way are depersonalized. They remain a *mass of maneuver* inflamed by promises of generic national supremacy promoted by the Nazi contingent flanking a vintage car disguised as a cardboard tank. This is how, in a few minutes, Jodorowsky invites the viewer to a meditation on the invocation of

the sacred and how, once this practice is abandoned in the church premises, it mythologizes the very life of the fortress generating political currents with the force specific to religious radicalism.

Political life in the 20th century, propagator of the mythical, legendary gesture

Two political systems will face each other until the end of the 20th century in multiple forms of war, both alternatives to the monarchical system, a successful millennial political construct of religious states. The communist system and the democratic (capitalist) system are found in expressions full of pathos known to Europe since the time of the legendary ancient Greece. But before developing further the diverse and yet always the same ways in which myth re-finds its manifestation in post-monarchic human communities, a comprehensive definition of the very notion of myth is necessary. Mircea Eliade again provides us with the necessary basis for the soundness of the demonstration. He records the following about the myth:

The myth relates a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, *ab initio*. But to relate a sacred history is equivalent to revealing a mystery. For the persons of the myth are not human beings; they are gods or culture heroes, and for this reason their *gesta* constitute mysteries; man could not know their acts if they were not revealed to him. The myth, then, is the history of what took place in *illo tempore*, the recital of what the gods or the semidivine beings did at the beginning of time. To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*. Once told, that is, revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth. (Eliade, 1959, p. 95)

Human society, therefore, continues to prove *incapable* of refraining from generating sacredness at any stage of its evolution. The favourite resort for this creative reflex seems to be the intensity of the relationship between the rulers and the nation. Supported for millennia by the monarchical order, this permanently tense relationship was endorsed by the church, the king's partner and his first supporter. Even in contemporary history, we can see certain patterns that have perpetuated themselves.

In the communist space, the rulers claimed many of the attributes of the *gods*, assiduously building an image of supermen and consistently inspiring due fear before their divine superiority. In democratic regimes the analogies become more subtle, but not absent, and the popular hunger of adoration will pour upon

institutions and, temporarily, upon certain individuals, deifying principles rather than human figures.

From the outside, the two social constructs have long seemed antagonistic. However, the collapse of the communist *bloc* which also meant the first direct dialogue between each other, instead of generating a series of conflictual interactions (which would have been natural when two opposite directions meet), created more of a state of confusion in both systems. Instead of clashing further, as they had done for most of the 20th century, they suddenly felt drawn to each other by an inexplicable common, shared feeling.

What could the explanation be? Precisely the political construct which appeals to the mythological analogy, thus offering a space of expression to the elements most deeply assimilated by the consciousness of human communities. Nothing unusual in the cumulative and by no means de-tensioning phenomenon that the opening of the communist space had on European socio-political life. Strangely, the great political thinkers did not predict this phenomenon, the expectations being obviously for an *inconsequential surrender of the Eastern bloc* and a satisfying relaxation of the victorious Western civilization. It does not seem to have been anticipated and, implicitly, planned in any way to resolve the convergence of all the mythological inflammations in Eastern and Western European political life.

Even the performing arts, accustomed by their very vocation to take the pulse of the moment, did not predict what was happening in the subtle magma of societies. The Western European film was happy to support the triumph of democracy, and the Eastern European one the difficulties of the transition to democracy of the communist societies. None of this was going to happen. Democracies have been contaminated by the influences of communist ideology, and societies, both Eastern and Western, investing in intangible ideals of communal Eden, will plunge into scepticism or fragmentary fanaticism (on minor elements of political combat suddenly elevated to the rank of governing principles).

It is not the first time when the colonies, especially those established in the Americas, explain to Europe its own contradictions through the lenses of geographical distance and through the cultural reinterpretations in which they have thrived for centuries. Moreover, the uninterrupted contact with the traditions of the natives, who are closer to the human origin than the social convention, kept their instinct firm and as such offered them the chance to

decipher the illusion when it encompasses the mankind and/or human communities providing to the imagination a deceptive incarnation, ready to make it reality.

They develop culturally closer to magical societies, the first coagulations of human groups that enjoy discovering the metaphysical explanation of life and death in close connection with the laws of nature that primarily govern man. In the lands of the Americas, the European remains a visitor, a researcher, roaming places previously named by other nations and loaded with their dreams or their enchantments. There the European relives his childhood building new nations with two ages, both belonging to the place they came from and the land they reached.

This is also why Jodorowsky's reflection on contemporary history is so valuable, on how, fascinated by itself, European society risks detaching itself from the flow of historicity and building in fantasy, in other words detaching itself from its story and stepping into the fairy tale. The dangerous magical ritual through which this evolutionary falsetto can happen is closely related to theatre, a game of reality capable of substituting it in the human mind, having its roots in primary religious practices ultimately destined for collective delirium, various exorcisms.

The theatre best represents us, as human beings, the *temptation to escape*, possibly forever in the universe that we alone know how to build for ourselves. The theatre calls forth in the individual the intuition of sacredness and is reproduced from now on in the newly secularized European societies by the creative political spectacle of the political gesture with its historicizing purpose. It is certainly the reason why Jodorowsky chooses to approach in his film, *The Dance of Reality*, a cinematographic style imbued with theatricality. He thus offers a fair mirror to a century of experimental political scaffolding designed to discover the new path of history for a post-monarchical Europe.

The Dance of Reality as a whole is a film of bewildering complexity that the present contribution has not set out to explore in detail. But the key to *mythologizing politics* that Jodorowsky offers us as a key to the modern world is a major contribution worth noting. It is a revealing detail for the evolution of European societies at the beginning of the second millennium, the developed conflicts, and unanswered questions. For all this, the Chilean film is worth going through as a history lesson and an ominous look towards a European future of political theatre *iconostases*.

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