



Marcin Kępiński

The Sacred and Film
Darren Aronofsky's
Transcendent Cinema

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Published by Lodz University Press & Jagiellonian University Press
First edition, Lodz–Cracow 2025
W.11593.24.0.M

ISBN 978-83-8331-668-0 – paperback Lodz University Press
e-ISBN 978-83-8331-669-7 – electronic version Lodz University Press
ISBN 978-83-233-5519-9 – paperback Jagiellonian University Press
e-ISBN 978-83-233-7686-6 – electronic version Jagiellonian University Press

<https://doi.org/10.18778/8331-669-7>

Lodz University Press
90-237 Lodz, 34a Matejki St., Poland
www.wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl
e-mail: ksiegarnia@uni.lodz.pl
phone +48 42 665 55 77



Jagiellonian University Press
Editorial Offices, 31-126 Cracow, 9/2 Michałowskiego St., Poland
Phone: +48 12 663 23 80, Fax: +48 12 663 23 83
Distribution: Phone: +48 12 631 01 97, Fax: +48 12 631 01 98
Cell Phone: + 48 506 006 674, e-mail: sprzedaz@wuj.pl
Bank: PEKAO SA, IBAN PL 80 1240 4722 1111 0000 4856 3325



www.uj.pl

The book is available in the Columbia University Press catalog: <https://cup.columbia.edu>

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CHAPTER I

CINEMA, ANTHROPOLOGY, TRANSCENDENCE

1. Films and Mythical Stories, Cultural Trails, and Topoi

What do cinema, literature, and cultural anthropology have in common? One answer lies in understanding them as stories about reality, leading us to “meanings that transcend the surface of events – this is the true purpose of anthropological research”.¹ A fictional narrative leads us to the real world, if only because it is completed by the reader or viewer. The text itself, whether literary or cinematic, does not form a closed cultural whole without an interpretation that presupposes a process of deciphering its meanings: “the meaning of a story emerges at the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader. The act of reading is not only creative, but becomes a critical moment in the process of transforming the reader’s experience through the story.”²

The meaning of a work, both literary and cinematic, exceeds the author’s intentions. Film, understood as a unique cultural text, mediates between individuals and the world, shaping their understanding and remaining an open universe full of interpretable meanings: “the relationship between life and story is also manifested by the fact that human actions can be located in a field of symbolic references”.³ Let us add that the actions of literary and film characters contain numerous references to the realms of myths and symbols. A film story may unconsciously incorporate mythical motifs told through symbols by the filmmaker.⁴ Mircea Eliade argued that even modern, rational

¹ D. Czaja, *Sygnatura i fragment. Narracje antropologiczne* (Signature and Fragment. Anthropological Narrations), Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2004, p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴ According to Paul Ricoeur, one of the cultural realms that is attractive for anthropological interpretations is the realm of poetic imagination – this term can be understood very broadly, as a specific code of an artistic work, and thus also of film. The author does not need to be aware of all its meanings – they “transcend” the author’s intentions. See: P. Ricoeur, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka. Rozprawy o metodzie* (Existence and Hermeneutics. Treatises on Method), selection, edition, and introduction by

humans need myths to express and interpret their existence. Without realising it, individuals experience eternal mythical motifs in their seemingly profane existence. When a reflective, sensitive individual becomes aware of these distant reflections in their life, they approach an actively lived process of individuation. This awareness is particularly acute when they see a mere semblance of a just order in the universally recognised social order, find the dominant values of the legitimate culture insufficient for self-development, and recognise the system's norms as stifling to their creative freedom and personal liberty.⁵ Although Eliade is often viewed as an expert on archaic myths, which he used to reconstruct the primordial religiousness of "symbolic man", his understanding of myth is valuable when analysing cinematic works that contain distant reflections and motifs of ancient myths, such as the cosmogonic myth, the sacrificial myth (of death and resurrection), myths of origin, the Great (Sacred) Time, the cosmic mountain, the sacred tree, *renovatio*, initiation, eschatology, and many others.⁶ In archaic societies, myths were the foundation of spiritual and religious life.

The films I am writing about, as well as the literature I am referring, stem from a critical, even rebellious, stance against symbolic violence and the imposition of cultural norms that constrain individual creativity and dictate a specific understanding and experience of the surrounding world. The protagonists of Darren Aronofsky's films, which I have chosen to analyse, exemplify this attitude. They are individualists in conflict with the social and cultural system, existing on its margins, often adopting an attitude of alienation or open rebellion, and experiencing personal tragedies. Typically, they are doomed to lose, standing alone against everyone, against total institutions. If they do win, the ultimate cost of their love of freedom and resistance to the power of the *Combine* is often their death.

S. Cichowicz, collective translation. Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1985, pp. 60–61, 126–129, 322–323, 334–335.

⁵ See J. Prokopiuk, "C.G. Jung, czyli gnoza XX wieku" (C.G. Jung, or Twentieth-Century Gnosis), C.G. Jung, *Archetypy i symbole. Pisma wybrane* (Archetypes and Symbols. Selected writings), translated by J. Prokopiuk, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1976, pp. 16–22.

⁶ For a definition of myth, understood as a true story describing the "intrusion" of the sacred into the realm of the World and serving as a model instructive of all meaningful human actions, refer to pages 12–13 of M. Eliade's renowned work *Aspekty mitu* (Aspects of Myth), translated by P. Mrówczyński, Warsaw, 1998. Furthermore, I have extensively discussed the understanding of myth in cultural anthropology, including the initiation myth, in chapter two of my book *Mit, symbol, historia, tradycja. Gombrowicza gry z kulturą* (Myth, Symbol, History, Tradition: Gombrowicz's Games with Culture), Warsaw, 2006, pp. 76–100.

We should therefore seek mythical motifs and symbols in the contemporary world, even in the seemingly bland one. Existential themes in timeless cultural texts, both literary and cinematic, referring to the general human condition, serve as hidden signposts for those searching for their place in the world and a way to experience it. A similar role of establishing meaning and explaining reality was once fulfilled by the great myths:⁷ “The relationship between life and story is also manifested by the fact that human actions can be located in the field of symbolic references.”⁸ One of the primary tasks of the cultural anthropologist is not only to interpret cultural texts but also to reveal their symbolic content and the mechanisms through which they influence the viewer. Film remains an attractive medium for cultural anthropology, not only because of its conveyed, often hidden, symbolic content and mythical narratives, but also because it is an art form that significantly shapes the contemporary iconosphere and imagination.⁹

Art, literature, and film are important elements of our spiritual life:

Cultural anthropology posits that myth, ritual, and art serve as three ways of humanity’s self-sacralisation, offering emotional responses to the fundamental intellectual inquiry: what is the world? Myth, ritual, and art embody three overarching optimistic responses, each encompassing numerous specific answers to other humanity’s questions concerning itself.¹⁰

⁷ See M. Eliade, *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów* (The Sacred, Myth, History. A Selection of Essays), selection and introduction by M. Czerwiński, translated by A. Tatarkiewicz, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1993; idem, *Próba labiryntu. Rozmowy z Claude-Henri Rocquetem* (Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet), translated by K. Środa, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sen, 1992; J. Campbell, *Potęga mitu: rozmowy Billa Moyersa z Josephem Campbellem* (Power of Myth: Bill Moyers in Conversation With Joseph Campbell), edited by B.S. Flowers, translated by I. Kania, Kraków: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, 2007.

⁸ D. Czaja, *Sygnatura i fragment...*, p. 187.

⁹ On the topic of interpreting and deciphering the meanings of a film work, see D. Czaja, “Symbol i film. Uwagi metodologiczne” (Symbol and Film. Methodological Notes), W. Szpilka, “Zobaczyć świat. Etnografia wobec filmu i kultury masowej” (To See the World. Ethnography in the Face of Film and Mass Culture), W. Michera, “Wyobraźnia alchemiczna Wernera Herzoga. Egzegeza symboliczna filmu *Szklane serce*” (Werner Herzog’s Alchemical Imagination. A Symbolic Exegesis of the film *Heart of Glass*), M. Sznajderman, “‘Stary Gringo.’ Motyw Don Kichota w filmie i literaturze” (“The Old Gringo.” The Don Quixote Motif in Film and Literature), *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* (Contexts. Polish Folk Art) 3–4 1992.

¹⁰ M. Sokołowski, *Kościół, kino, sacrum. W poszukiwaniu definicji filmów o tematyce religijnej* (Church, Cinema, the Sacred. In Search of a Definition of Religious Films), Olsztyn: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kastalia, 2002, p. 65.

Literature, as a narrative medium addressing matters of exceptional or seemingly ordinary significance, perpetuates the tradition of grand storytelling found in myths, elucidating the origins of humanity and the world and their meaning. While literature borrows many topoi from mythic narratives, it alters the manner in which stories are recounted and its protagonists, yet fundamentally remains closely aligned with the core of the monomyth.¹¹ In Eliade's terms, something much older and more powerful is revealed to us by means of and through literature, which he termed the realm of images or simply the sacred.¹² Clearly, its components, whether found in literature or cinema, are distant echoes of the experiences of archaic, religious humanity, catalysed by the revelation of the sacred in contrast to the *profane*:¹³ "Man attains knowledge of the sacred because it manifests itself, because it turns out to be entirely distinct from the secular."¹⁴ In his research, Eliade used various forms of literature, documents, and sacred texts, including religious treatises, myths, stories, and narratives concerning the sacred sphere and, most importantly, its manifestation to humanity as a hierophany.¹⁵ This scholar of the sacred and phenomenologist of religion

strongly emphasises the enduring presence of symbolic and mythic experiences in human existence. Through these experiences, individuals come to understand and engage with the non-historical sacred reality. In the concept of the sacred, Eliade underscores its fundamental reality, i.e., the ontic value and existential power it possesses. This reality is never given to humanity directly, but reveals itself through myths, symbols, and hierophanies.¹⁶

As Eliade acknowledged, defining the phenomenon of sacredness precisely is challenging, however, "the sacred is something different, distinct from the surrounding cosmic environment [...] it exists in an absolute, immovable and

¹¹ M. Eliade, *Próba labiryntu...* p. 180, cf. idem, *Aspekty mitu* (Aspects of Myth), translated by P. Mrówczyński, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo KR, 1998, p. 198; J. Campbell, *Potęga mitu...*, pp. 20–23.

¹² See A. Rega, *Człowiek w świecie symboli. Antropologia filozoficzna Mircei Eliadego* (Man in the World of Symbols. Mircea Eliade's Philosophical Anthropology), Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, 2001, pp. 13–24.

¹³ M. Eliade, *Sacrum i profanum* (The Sacred and the Profane), translated by R. Reszke, Warsaw 1999, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ See M. Eliade. *Traktat o historii religii* (A Treatise on the History of Religion), translated by J. Wierusz-Kowalski, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo KR, 2000, pp. 19–20.

¹⁶ J. Bramorski, "Antropologiczny wymiar symboliki przestrzeni sakralnej w ujęciu Mircei Eliadego" (Anthropological Dimension of the Symbolism of Sacred Space as Seen by Mircea Eliade), *Forum Teologiczne*, vol. III, 2002, p. 156. M. Eliade, *Próba labiryntu...*, p. 180. Cf. idem, *Aspekty mitu...*, p. 198; J. Campbell. *Potęga mitu...*, pp. 20–23.

static manner, not subject to becoming”.¹⁷ Moreover, it constitutes an irreducible and intrinsic component of religious experience, while the symbolic and mythic experience of the world remains integral to human life.

Even today, it has its place in film, but no longer as a religious, though certainly metaphysical, experience. So why do we continue to discuss the sacred and its symbolic meaning within the realm of film art?

The purpose of using the language of the sacred – understood very broadly (e.g., the sacred vs. “the language of images”, “the language of film”) – is thus, on the one hand, humanity’s desire to communicate with the metaphysical and the mysterious; and on the other hand, the need to describe this supernatural world, which undeniably exists, though often invisible, in life, art, and film.¹⁸

Marek Sokołowski proposes a broad understanding of the term, referring it to the art of film: “in the broadest sense, common to many views, the notion of the sacred defines the metaphysical character of reality”.¹⁹ The authors of the cited studies on the role and nature of the sacred in film emphasise that nowadays it refers to the presence of metaphysical elements as well as symbols and mythical motifs in film works, without restricting their considerations to strictly religious cinema only. Mariola Marczak observes that while

religious films evoke the sphere of transcendence through their structures, there exists a common area with metaphysical films. In this shared space, references to transcendence are present, but without specific ties to institutional religion, a system of beliefs, a particular religious world view, or a message of faith entrenched in doctrinal conformity.²⁰

The Tenth Muse draws upon both mythological and literary traditions. Films are crafted within a specific cultural context, using its various elements, and they can co-create this context. Similarly to literature, films create an image of the human nature and the meanings embedded within human existence, explore

¹⁷ M. Eliade, *Traktat...*, p. 42.

¹⁸ I. Grodź, “Wielka wiara, wielka miłość... Sacrum w kinie na przykładzie *Matki Joanny od Aniołów* Jerzego Kawalerowicza” (*Great Faith, Great Love... The Sacred in Cinema on the Example of Mother Joan of the Angels by Jerzy Kawalerowicz*), *Poznańskie Spotkania Językoznawcze* (Poznań Linguistic Meetings) 34, 2017, p. 86.

¹⁹ M. Sokołowski, op. cit., p. 65.

²⁰ M. Marczak, “Między kontemplacją a dramatem. O pewnej tendencji w kinie religijnym i metafizycznym ostatnich lat” (*Between Contemplation and Drama. On a Trend in Religious and Metaphysical Cinema in Recent Years*), *Sacrum w kinie dekadę później: szkice, eseje, rozprawy* (*The Sacred in Cinema a Decade Later: Sketches, Essays, Dissertations*), edited by S.J. Konefał, M. Zelent, and K. Kornacki, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2013, p. 25.

the intricacies of the products of the human mind, and show attempts to impose order upon the world through culture. Darren Aronofsky, who uses many symbols in his works and reimagines myths through cinematic rituals, requires the viewer to be able to go beyond the seemingly simple story, plot, and themes present in the film. Hence the references to the sacred and transcendence in the works of this director.

He wants the viewer to try to answer important questions: about good and evil, freedom and bondage, the essence of humanity, the significance of human actions, and one's place in the world. Questions about love and hate, betrayal and loyalty, man and woman, existence and nothingness, chaos and order, and also about the origin of everything – God as the creator. A kind of cinematic transcendence. A keen observer of Aronofsky's body of work will recognise the presence of metaphysical themes, sometimes directly addressing religious matters. Marczak refers to this type of cinema as metaphysical. It can be defined by the research scope of metaphysics as part of philosophy:

then, the term “metaphysical film” denotes a work in which one of philosophy's metaphysical discourses can be found, such as the issue of the interplay between God, humanity, and the world. It also includes cinematic analyses exploring human existence and, less frequently, being and the nature of the world; there may or may not be references to the realm of transcendence, including a personal God. It is enough that we are dealing with a comprehensive (holistic) vision of human existence from birth to death, with a particular focus on what gives or can give meaning to life.²¹

Indeed, cinema of this kind underscores the significance of a metaphysical dimension within culture.

The modern sacred, also present in the film,

can be recognised by certain features and content that could not have been created without religion. It unveils mysteries and raises fundamental questions: How to live? Why live? What is the meaning of suffering? Why is there death? These contemplations point towards the transcendence of humanity, appealing to individuals' experiences and conscience.²²

When attempting to decipher hidden meanings, fragments of mythical stories, and symbols, it is crucial to acknowledge that, to the extent they can be discerned, they only serve as distant reflections of the symbolic language prevalent in ancient cultures. However, this does not imply that they are entirely

²¹ Ibid.

²² M. Sokołowski, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

absent or resemble a haphazard patchwork or collage assembled without understanding the significance of their components. In my opinion, Aronofsky's films are closer to impressionist works composed of colourful patches, which the viewer tries to comprehend through careful analysis, from a certain distance, and observing how light interacts with the work from various angles. We can agree with Zbigniew Benedyktowicz's assertion that cinema reproduces and renews myth, while contemporary film is one of the mythical texts examined by cultural anthropology. Film serves as a medium for the continuation, transformation, and renewal of symbolic meanings:

Film, as a myth-making medium (an area for the continuation, transformation, and renewal of meanings) and as a record of contemporaneity (customs, gesture, movement, models of beauty, looks, fashion, thematic trends, and mental structures of a given time, etc., recorded in films), and also because of the reflection of distinctiveness or the blending (or levelling) of cultural diversity that it preserves, responds to a specific sensorium shaped within the field of cultural anthropology.²³

Researchers of contemporary culture should pay attention to films that refer to mythical themes, using symbolism that ranges from simple to sophisticated, and often remains hidden from the viewer.

Finding, describing, and interpreting symbols (and their distant reflections) and cultural games should be the task of film culture researchers. Film and cultural research are closely linked "in the search, above all, for an image of the nature of man and the essence of culture, in the discovery of the richness of the products of human hands and minds, in the documentation of the diversity of ways of living and ordering the world".²⁴ Maryla Hopfinger emphasises that, for a classic considering film and anthropology as common fields of human reflection on the self and the forms of consciousness of our species, such as Aleksander Jackiewicz, the anthropology of film represented a further step in the evolution of modern film studies.²⁵

"Anthropology and film were born of European culture," we read in this author's work. "They arise in particular from a certain characteristic of European culture that Leszek Kołakowski described as the ability to self-question, to look at oneself

²³ Z. Benedyktowicz, "Wprowadzenie" (Introduction), *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* (Contexts. Polish Folk Art) 3–4, 1992, pp. 3–4.

²⁴ M. Hopfinger, "Film i antropologia" (Film and Anthropology), *Sztuka na wysokości oczu. Film i antropologia* (Art at Eye Level. Film and Anthropology), edited by Z. Benedyktowicz, D. Palczewska, and T. Rutkowska, Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1985, p. 195.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 195–196.

through the eyes of others, and to take an interest in others and to look at them suspending one's own perspective view of the world.²⁶

In its essence, cinema fulfils itself in a form that closely aligns with Aristotle's ideal of mimesis, understood as the imitation of reality (not passive, however, but creative), both internal and external to the experiencing subject, the search for the essence of things, and the consequent enrichment of content.²⁷

Hopfinger asserts that film is a product of European culture:

it was born out of human endeavours to capture time, to freeze space, to recreate movement, and dreams of embalming the appearance of people and things, of repeating events that had already taken place. The cinema fascinated with frozen matter, with its eyewitnessing quality, with the dynamics of movement and rhythm. It fascinated both with its ability to evoke the real world in its physical dimensions and with its potential to depict imaginary realms, showing quasi-real and impossible phenomena. The invention of cinema realised the dream of replicating the texture of reality and depicting the depths of imagination.²⁸

The author suggests that film, unlike any other medium, offers a comprehensive portrayal of human existence within its anthropological context, from various perspectives and points of view, showing sensations, states of the psyche – better described perhaps as states of the soul – experiences, interactions with others and one's own inner self, and problems with culture, the social system, and its institutions. By showing all this, cinema evokes profound emotions and existential anxiety in sensitive viewers, enabling them to empathise with the metaphysical dilemmas faced by the film characters who, after all, did not come out of nowhere, but grew out of the deep and eternal layers of history narrated in myths.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 196–197. In Polish literature, the most prominent representative of this type of critical, detached thinking about one's own culture and its contents conveyed to the individual is, in my opinion, Witold Gombrowicz. I devoted a chapter of my book *Mit, symbol, historia, tradycja. Gombrowicza gry z kulturą* (Myth, Symbol, History, Tradition: Gombrowicz's Games with Culture) to such an interpretation of his *Trans-Atlantyk* as a form of game with Polish culture and national identity.

²⁷ With the decline of Renaissance and Classicism, the aesthetic supremacy of mimesis as an artistic principle gave way to other, newer ideas, returning as the notion of faithfully representing social concerns in realist literature. Contemporary art, beginning with movements like Dadaism and abstractionism, has dramatically departed from the principle of mimesis. Susan Sontag posited photography as the most realistic, and therefore the easiest, form of mimesis in art. She articulated this perspective in her renowned collection of essays on photography, published in Poland in 1986.

²⁸ M. Hopfinger, op. cit., p. 197.

A good film, much like good literature, demands from its audience a significant measure of sensitivity, imagination, and knowledge. Film holds the advantage over literature in its ability to employ moving images and sound to construct and convey the worlds envisioned by the artistic imagination. However, this advantage can sometimes turn into a disadvantage, as it may deprive viewers of the opportunity to engage their own creative imagination, a skill essential in the world of literature for interpreting the author's intentions.

Neither film nor literature emerges from direct interaction between two communicating parties:

A literary text is therefore the result of indirect linguistic contact, which is manifested in language and only in language. The sender – the author – creates an informationally complete text, while its recipient – the reader – remains largely indeterminate, if not uncertain. Indeed, an author creating a literary work lacks assurance that the text will see publication and dissemination. Given the absence of direct contact between sender and recipient, the text must be finished and completely thought out.²⁹

When we approach a film, especially an adaptation of a literary work, as a cultural text – different yet akin to a literary text in certain respects – we must acknowledge that its reception and interpretation pose unresolved issues for the reader/viewer. I refrain from determining which of the cited cultural texts offers greater interpretive potential, but image fidelity can become a disadvantage for a film, of which some prominent directors are aware. Literalism, homogenisation, and oversimplification of meanings are significant pitfalls of mass culture, which was pointed out already by Antonina Kłoskowska. Given our discussion of an American director and American mass culture, often labelled as “shiny barbarism”³⁰ by critics, it must be said that it is sometimes an example of an excessive expansion of the contexts and reach of popular culture, also translating into film content.

Fortunately, Darren Aronofsky operates somewhat in the shadows of Hollywood, not being a director of box-office hits, and thus he is not constrained by the demands imposed on creators of purely commercial cinema aimed primarily at generating massive revenues. However, alongside considerations regarding the relationship between popular culture media and the world of finance, there arise other concerns regarding the manipulation of mass audiences by the creators of

²⁹ A. Kulawik, *Poetyka. Wstęp do teorii dzieła literackiego* (Poetics. An Introduction to the Theory of the Literary Work), 2nd edition, Kraków: Antykwa, 1994, p. 14.

³⁰ I use this term for the Americanisation of culture following Richard Hoggart, see *ibid.*, *Spojrzenie na kulturę robotniczą w Anglii* (A Look at Working-Class Culture in England), translated by A. Ambros, Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1976.

the cultural market. Are popular culture and its patterns, offered to the public, products of the people themselves, or are they imposed from above and serve as a means of controlling the masses? Furthermore:

does the development of culture in the form of commodities signify the dominance of market criteria over quality, artistry, honesty, and intellectual rigour? Does the ever-expanding market for popular culture ensure its true success by providing goods that people genuinely desire?

When popular culture is industrially produced and sold according to the rules of supply and demand, what takes precedence – profit or quality?³¹

In the context of American popular culture, the answers to these questions unfortunately do not evoke much optimism. It is not necessary to ask whether audiences are indoctrinated by the content of popular culture transmitted through the media, as it is evident that they are indeed influenced to heighten demand for its products and to promote the prevalence of the lifestyles it portrays.

To quote from Kłoskowska's seminal work on the critique of American mass culture:

Even the most reserved American critics of mass culture, [...] who do not claim that the common denominator must inevitably be the lowest, perceive the mechanism of unavoidable uniformity as a menace to unique cultural values. They delineate cultural conformity at the middle, if not the lowest, level as the cost of democratising culture. What characterises the stance of most of these critics is their acquiescence to the commercial system of cultural organisation as an unalterable framework and an unavoidable necessity.³²

Further on, the author addresses the issue of cultural value distortion, the influence of the commercial system, and the utilization of culture by politicians and the political system in the USA. Kłoskowska asserts that the functioning of mass culture is determined by the material interests of producers, and even its ostensibly apolitical entertainment sphere is not exempt from these influences. This phenomenon, I believe, is evident in the American film industry, which often relies on established patterns, making the same films over and over again, served to audiences in a similar way in terms of the storyline, genre, and technology. According to many critics of mass culture,

³¹ D. Strinati, *Wprowadzenie do kultury popularnej* (Introduction to Popular Culture), translated by W.J. Burszta, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, 1998, p. 16.

³² A. Kłoskowska, *Kultura masowa. Krytyka i obrona* (Mass Culture. Criticism and Defence), 2nd edition, Warsaw: PWN, 1980, p. 274.

American popular culture epitomises all the evils associated with mass culture. Given that mass culture arises from the mass production and consumption of cultural goods, it is relatively straightforward to associate America with the epicentre of mass culture; for here we are dealing with the capitalist society most closely aligned with these processes.³³

What holds significance here is the profit generated by viewer ratings and catering to an undemanding audience. In his seminal work on American mass culture, Józef Chałasiński observes that it has devolved into a culture of kitsch, imposed upon the masses from above, from sources alien to them. The public are passive consumers, with their involvement in culture limited to purchasing its products or, less frequently, refraining from consumption.

In contrast, the consumption of low-quality, trashy entertainment content is becoming a prevalent attitude among participants in American culture:

A measure of the ascendancy of consumerist, hedonistic attitudes within society is [...] the shift in the profiles of protagonists featured in standard biographies of “great people” published in American illustrated magazines [...]. Between 1901 and 1941, there was a noticeable decline in the number of articles dedicated to prominent figures in commerce, the liberal professions, and politics, while the number of articles highlighting individuals involved in leisure activities, athletics, and film stardom increased by 50%.³⁴

As evident, the process of supplanting the epitomes of cultural role models and popular culture heroes commenced in the early twentieth century. America, its history, politics, and culture

are woven from a dense mesh of various myths that interplay with one another, forming an “interwoven web of dependencies” that we may term American mythology, understood, however, not as a simple collection of myths but rather a network of complex communication systems. From these messages emerges an America that should not be subject to rational analysis; after all, myths are neither rational nor real, despite their grounding in reality.³⁵

³³ D. Strinati, op. cit., p. 30.

³⁴ J. Chałasiński, *Kultura amerykańska. Formowanie się kultury narodowej w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki* (American Culture. The Formation of a National Culture in the United States of America), 3rd edition, Warsaw: LSW, 1973, p. 302.

³⁵ J. Szymkowska-Bartyzel. *Nasza Ameryka wyobrażona. Polskie spotkania z amerykańską kulturą popularną po roku 1989* (Our Imagined America. Polish Encounters With American Popular Culture After 1989). Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2015, p. 31.

So how did the modern, mythicised version of the American Dream come about? The myth of America was created

based on certain aestheticised images of the country, its inhabitants, and lifestyle produced by popular culture, which, due to its inherent characteristics of reduction and simplification, was selective in its treatment of the elements from which pop-cultural texts were constructed: schematic narratives, settings, or types of protagonists, texts that primarily appealed to the emotions rather than the intellect of the audience, much like myths themselves.³⁶

Popular culture seems to be imposed from above, with very little, if any, room for negotiation of meaning between recipients and senders. Recipients of content distributed by mass media typically have no influence over the selection of content transmitted and produced. This is largely due to the highly commercial nature of American popular culture:

The commodity is the film produced along with the stars featured in it or the film space that can be used for product placement. The music from the film can become a separate commodity value, as can the gadgets created to advertise it. [...] The aim is not so much to create art but rather to generate profit – the business task of the cultural industry is to produce texts that will attract consumers, thereby securing support from advertisers, which ultimately translates into financial gain.³⁷

Other mass culture media, including the publishing market, the music market, magazines, television, and the Internet, operate in a similar way. Fortunately, there still exists a margin for more ambitious filmmakers, the figures of independent cinema.

It should be noted that cultural texts operating within the mass-market circuit often exhibit relatively low quality and serve as unsophisticated, common entertainment. Christopher Lasch has harshly criticised American culture, labelling it as a culture of narcissism. He examines the shifts in American culture that prioritise consumption and the gratification of hedonistic and selfish desires. Culture and society reinforce narcissistic traits in individuals, and the crisis in culture is intertwined with crises in family dynamics, education, politics, and the social system. According to the author, American institutions are to blame for this crisis, but he also accuses mass media of turning Americans into cinema lovers. They “fuel narcissistic dreams of fame and popularity and contribute to the lack of acceptance of one’s own existence as a simple and ordinary life [...]”³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁸ G. Ptaszek, “Kapitalizm jako źródło kulturowego narcyzmu w epoce późnej nowoczesności. Wprowadzenie do Kultury narcyzmu Christophera Lascha” (Capitalism

Teresa Rutkowska offers a different perspective on the influence of popular culture on film works:

A film work captures what is present and what is absent, what is visible and what lies beyond the realm of the visible, what is external and what is internal. The formatting of meaning is a complex and multi-level process. The basic level, of course, consists of a sequence of moving, audiovisual images that construct the narrative. However, these images do not flow in a uniformly continuous manner, nor are they entirely “transparent” in the majority of feature films. Recognising the principle of their organisation and being aware of the existence of such a principle, based on the experience of the film viewer and broader cultural and existential experiences, are crucial factors in constructing the work’s meaning [...] the above process is intricately linked to embedding the film work within its cultural context, enabling the intentions of the creator to align with the expectations of the viewer. The mechanism of mass culture continually expands this context; however, in response to the multitude of stimuli and the feeling of excessive complexity in the world, there is a tendency to schematise, simplify, and organise phenomena according to a “superimposed” or predetermined order.³⁹

There is no point in trying to uncover deeper layers of meaning or references to symbolism and myths in films created primarily for unsophisticated mass entertainment. It would be a futile effort.

Those acquainted with Aronofsky’s cinema will readily discern symbolic motifs within particular film titles. The search for them in cultural texts can also be found in the works of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, who analyse hierophanies, myths, symbols, and rituals in pursuit of a common thread of the unification of opposites. These seekers after symbols and myths provide readers with examples drawn not only from mythology or religion, but also from literature.

Darren Aronofsky’s films align with the tradition of narratives exploring profound existential dilemmas. Through his cinema, audiences are confronted with questions that delve into the essence of humanity and its place in the world.

as a Source of Cultural Narcissism in Late Modernity. An Introduction to Christopher Lasch’s Culture of Narcissism), C. Lasch, *Kultura narcyzmu. Amerykańskie życie w czasach malejących oczekiwań* (The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations), translated by G. Ptaszek and A. Skrzypek, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Sedno, 2015, p. 15.

³⁹ T. Rutkowska, “Ballada filmowa – czyli o powrotach, które trwają w nieskończoność” (A Film Ballad, or Returns That Go on Forever), *Sztuka na wysokości oczu. Film i antropologia* (Art at Eye Level. Film and Anthropology), edited by Z. Benedyktowicz, D. Palczewska, and T. Rutkowska, Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1985, p. 255.

These are the very problems and questions that the creators of ambitious cinema, which does not merely serve pop-cultural entertainment, have always sought to address. Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, who regard Marvel comic-book films as “something despicable”, share a similar disdain for what they perceive as mere “entertainment cinema”.⁴⁰ They believe that cinematic art should offer knowledge, inspiration, and enlightenment to its audience. Actors, in turn, are supposed to convey the significant emotional and psychological experiences of the characters they portray.⁴¹ Piotr Kowalski writes about the dangers of defining the subject of research, validating research procedures, and overinterpreting products of popular culture, including literature and films:

Researchers of contemporary culture, immersed in it and defined by it, must deal both with complications of this culture and the necessity of diagnosing its new paradigm, as well as maintain a cognitive, ironic distance from it. Only then will they be able to build a delicate balance between what this culture itself tells and their own story, which is, after all, inscribed in what its narratives are about.⁴²

The literary scholar and ethnographer draws the attention of scholars of popular culture to the necessity of distinguishing between popular, mass literature (fantasy is an example of the interpretive problems with popular literature), written for the widest possible audience with less refined aesthetic tastes, characterised by simple plot patterns and unsophisticated language evoking strong emotions, and fine literature, since the time of Aristotle categorised into lyric, epic, and drama. The unwarranted pursuit of (non-existent) mythical themes, deeper meanings, and ennobling (often shallow in its content) literary forms within popular culture often stems from a lack of methodological rigour:

Here are the reasons for questionable interpretative decisions: firstly, one needs not be concerned about individual text, its failure or shallowness; secondly, their serial functioning, in mass reception, encourages one to seek parallels with ancient cultural

⁴⁰ See “*Najpierw Scorsese, teraz Coppola. Mistrzowie kina idą na wojnę z filmową wytwórnią Marvela*” (First Scorsese, Now Coppola. The Masters of Cinema Go to War with Marvel's Film Label), <https://www.newsweek.pl/kultura/martin-scorsese-i-francis-ford-coppola-krytykuja-filmy-marvela/gbxx0ph> [accessed on: October 23, 2019].

⁴¹ One reviewer of this book has rightly noted that Francis Ford Coppola is not only the director of *The Godfather*, but also of the 3D film *Captain EO*, starring Michael Jackson, which was screened at Disneyland, which suggests a certain irony in his disparagement of cinematic products of popular culture.

⁴² P. Kowalski, *Popkultura i humaniści. Daleki od kompletności remanent spraw, poglądów i mistyfikacji* (Popular culture and Humanists. A Far From Complete Inventory of Issues, Views, and Mystifications), Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2004, p. 26.