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A Path Less Traveled: Rethinking Spirituality in the Films of Alejandro Jodorowsky

Abstract

This essay seeks to add to the scholarship around the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky by looking at how Jodorowsky challenge to mainstream religion and spirituality in two of his major films: *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*. I situate both these films within their cultural context and, working with Slavoj Žižek's idea of the sadistic trap, explore how they challenge not only mainstream religious beliefs but countercultural ones as well. By doing so, I hope to cast some light on what makes the subversive nature of his films so valuable and to provide some guidance to two films that can be quite overwhelming to try to understand.

Keywords

Alejandro Jodorowsky, *El Topo*, *The Holy Mountain*, Slavoj Žižek, Counterculture

Author Notes

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Introduction: Framing Jodorowsky

With the recent resurgence in interest that has come about in the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky, due to the reissuing of his films on home video as well as the recent documentary *Jodorowsky's Dune* and the release of Jodorowsky's first feature film in twenty-three years, *The Dance of Reality*, the time has come to start building a more substantial body of criticism around his films. My aim here is to lay another brick in the foundations of this criticism through an analysis of two of his most important films: *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*. Both of them are films that deal with religion and spirituality but in both films Jodorowsky questions and undermines ideas of faith that were popular in the 1960s in complex and challenging ways. I hope here to be able to lay down a path through his spiritual quests in these two films, which can be quite overwhelming experiences due to Jodorowsky's unconventional narratives, extensive use of symbolic imagery and, of course, the extreme graphic violence, sexuality and other shock images that made his films so famous and infamous in the first place.

However, if we wish to explore how Jodorowsky challenges religious culture and counterculture of the 60's and 70's it is first necessary to situate the films within the context of the time period. Jodorowsky made his name by appealing to the American counterculture of the time period, as his films found their success through midnight screenings mostly in New York and drew in such figures as John Lennon and Timothy Leary. Thus did they find their way into the pantheon of counterculture films of the era, though if we wish to discuss their role in this movement we must first discuss the concept of counterculture itself. "Counterculture" is a term that has gone through a striking evolution, as Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle note in their introduction to *Imagine Nation: the American Counter Culture of the 1960's and 70's*, "...the inexorable fate of easy terms like "counterculture" or, for that matter, "Generation X" [is that] they inevitably lose

their historical mooring, become shorthand references, then shortcuts to thinking, and finally Pepsi commercial sound bites.”¹ Later in the same piece they write:

The term “counterculture” falsely reifies what should never properly be construed as a social movement. It was an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, “lifestyles,” ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations and affirmations. These roles were played by people who defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were.²

Perhaps the sheer chaos of Jodorowsky’s films, *The Holy Mountain* in particular, makes them the perfect embodiment of this counterculture. The people who most embraced Jodorowsky’s films, who filled theaters at midnight screenings to watch the spectacle of his unique visions unfold on screen, were these very people looking to define themselves by what they were not. This makes it very difficult to pin down any easy definition of counterculture, but that is actually well suited to Jodorowsky’s films given the manner in which they take on religious, cultural, political and ethical mores of the time. In *The Wild One* (something of a proto-counterculture film) the character Mildred asks Marlon Brando’s Johnny Strabler, “Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?” to which Johnny replies, “Whaddya got?”

It is this idea of the counterculture that Jodorowsky’s films appeal to: the uniform rejection of all societal conventions including (perhaps especially) religion. And Jodorowsky never focuses on any particular outlet either. Rather his films cover huge swathes of the counterculture spirit from drug culture to free love to Eastern spiritualism to reinterpretations of Christianity to New Age practices and more. At the same time though Jodorowsky embraces none of them. It can perhaps be argued then that the singular vision of spirituality that Jodorowsky provides in these two films were his way of showing those who fell in with the counterculture of the time a path forward, a way of maneuvering through not just the ills of mainstream religion but the chaos of their own beliefs as well. When watching his films, it is easy to miss that, while Jodorowsky

embraced the counterculture, he was critical of it as well, and that while these films skewer mainstream religion, Jodorowsky is also working to undermine the ideology of countercultural convictions as thoroughly as they worked to undermine the convictions of mainstream culture.

It is worth taking the time to understand how Jodorowsky does this and a useful approach to it is Slavoj Zizek's idea of the sadistic trap, which is something Jodorowsky can be said to employ in his films. Zizek bases the sadistic trap on Lacan's definition of sadism and which Zizek appropriates for film analysis in his essay "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large." Zizek uses Hitchcock as an example of how a director can catch us in a sadistic trap:

First, he sets a trap of sadistic identification for the viewer by way of arousing in him/her the 'sadistic' desire to see the hero crush the bad guy, this suffering 'fullness of being....Once the viewer is filled out with the Will-to-Enjoy, Hitchcock closes the trap by simply realizing the viewer's desire: in having his/her desire fully realized, the viewer obtains more than he/she asked for...and is thus forced to concede that, in the very moment he/she was possessed by the Will to see the bad guy annihilated, he/she was effectively manipulated by the only true sadist, Hitchcock himself.³

In other words, Zizek articulates a means by which Hitchcock confronts us with how twisted our desires are simply by showing them to us. One of the most effective examples of this in Hitchcock's filmography is in *Notorious*, in which we see Devlin (Cary Grant) and Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) face off against the Nazi spy Sebastian (Claude Rains). Sebastian, as a Nazi, a criminal and a kidnapper becomes an easy target for contempt in the audience and we desire to see him punished for his many transgressions. However, when Hitchcock brings us to that moment, we see Sebastian reduced to such pathetic ineptitude that we suddenly find ourselves pitying him and even dreading what's in store for him. Hitchcock then punishes us for the sadistic desire we earlier felt to see Sebastian pay for his crimes.

This is a tactic that Jodorowsky employs extensively in all his films and which is, in its way, a key to how Jodorowsky explores his ideas of spirituality, as we see Jodorowsky continually trying to confront us with unpleasant truths about our ideas of faith, spirituality and enlightenment.

Jodorowsky, however, is not punishing us in quite the same way as Hitchcock is. If Hitchcock wanted to force us to confront the dark implications of our desire to see people punished, Jodorowsky wants to force us to confront the difficulty and even outright futility of achieving spiritual fulfillment in our lives. We will first look at how he does this in *El Topo*, in which we see an attempt at enlightenment end in failure, and then through *The Holy Mountain*, where enlightenment becomes possible only after rejecting every conventional idea of spirituality that we possess.

To help navigate some of the more difficult passages in these films, I will also be working with Ben Cobb's *Anarchy and Alchemy: The Films of Alejandro Jodorowsky* because, while it is a book intended for public consumption and as such doesn't actually contain a great deal of analysis, it does provide a great deal of context for some of the more obscure symbols and references in these films.

***El Topo*: Digging Downward to Reach the Sun**

El Topo is the film that brought Jodorowsky international attention. John Lennon is reported to have called it the greatest film ever made, and there is a certain ironic pleasure in bearing this in mind when watching the film's relentless assault of graphic violence, depraved sexuality, sacrilegious imagery and the parade of dwarves, amputees and other differently abled people who make up much of the film's cast and to think that it was adored by the artist behind "Imagine." And yet it is not so surprising when you get at the heart of the film because, underneath all of it, *El Topo* is a deeply spiritual film.

El Topo is more or less a western, or it may be more fitting to say that it borrows heavily from the motifs of the western. Jodorowsky plays the lead as el Topo,⁴ who dresses entirely in

black, and the film has its requisite deserts, outlaws, six shooters, cowboy hats and other staples of the western genre. But the bizarre imagery Jodorowsky surrounds them with often makes us hyper-aware of these images. For example, for the first third of the film, el Topo rides everywhere with a naked child whom we understand to be his son and Jodorowsky often frames his shots so as to call attention to the contrast between them, such as shooting them straight on while on horseback, the son sitting in front of the father, his pale skin (peculiarly pale, considering he is going naked in a desert) in contrast to the father's solid black outfit (through most of the film, el Topo also wears long hair and a beard, both dark).

The naked child is in itself another image that is rather typical of Jodorowsky in general and *El Topo* in particular. It is of course easy to be discomfited by the sight of child nudity, even in an artistic context, but I will also make the bold claim that there has probably never been a more symbol obsessed director in all of cinema than Jodorowsky and as such it should be remembered that nudity, especially in relation to children, is also a symbol of purity and innocence and indeed the moment in the film when the child is finally clothed (ironically in a monk's cassock) comes at the moment at which he loses his innocence. It is impossible, however, not to see the image of the naked child with a dual mind: one that is aware of the symbolic lineage of the naked child but also is put off by the taboo nature of such an image in contemporary culture.

El Topo is divided into four sections: "Genesis," "Prophets," "Psalms" and "Apocalypse." Each of these sections, introduced by intertitles, seems to correspond to four shifts in the spiritual progression of el Topo and as such it is worth looking at the character's progression through the lens of this structure. First a voice over narration explains the title and sets the context for el Topo's spiritual journey. El Topo in Spanish is "The Mole" and we are told in the voice over that the mole spends its entire life digging to find the sun only to be blinded by the light when it reaches

the surface. There is an idea here of the path to enlightenment as one that leads to self-destruction, which, as the journey unfolds, we see is essentially what happens to el Topo.

In the first sequence, “Genesis,” we see el Topo riding into a town with his son. There has recently been a massacre that has left nearly everyone in the village dead. He finds out from the last dying resident that a group of outlaws are responsible for the massacre (we also see the outlaws in a cross sequence indulging in bizarre fetishes, including one who makes the outline of a naked woman out of baked beans and proceeds to make love to it). He confronts and kills them but finds out before killing the last one that they were working for a colonel. El Topo finds the colonel in a monastery where other outlaws are forcing the monks to act as whores for them (one of them even uses his blood to smear on their lips as lipstick). This kind of perversion of Christian piety is a common motif in Jodorowsky’s films, though it is worth noting that, unlike many Christian figures in many of his films, these monks lack the corruption of most of Jodorowsky’s Christian figures.

There is also a woman at the monastery who the colonel subjugates, which is probably why, while el Topo kills all the outlaws who don’t surrender to him, he chooses instead to castrate the colonel. Castration comes up alarmingly often in Jodorowsky’s films and here and in one other film (*Santa Sangre*) the castratee reacts by killing himself. Zizek, in his essay “‘In his Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large’” talks about wrongful imprisonment as “the ‘empirical’ fragment of reality which served as its experiential support” for all of Hitchcock’s films, which is to say that wrongful imprisonment was a deep rooted fear that Hitchcock constantly found himself returning to in his films.^{5 6} One wonders if castration serves as a similar anxiety for Jodorowsky, as not only is there quite an abundance of literal castrations in his films, I could exhaust the rest of this article by discussing all of the figurative castrations we see as well, though some will reveal themselves to the intuitive reader as we work our way through the plot.

We see in the monastery sequence el Topo as a figure with a strong sense of righteousness (he clearly feels a duty to avenge the massacre he encounters) but still for him his solution is to right wrongs through violence. If this sequence were to comprise the entirety of *El Topo* it would be quite the conventional film: a great injustice is committed and the hero sets out to punish those responsible, killing the bad guy and riding off into the sunset with the girl. Up until now the film has, at least in its broad strokes, played out like a classic Western. For *El Topo* though, this conventional framework is only the first step in a long spiritual journey and while he does ride off into the sunset with the girl, he chooses her over his son, giving in to the weakness of the flesh and abandoning him to the care of the monks, telling his son as he rides away to hate him and someday kill him for what he did to him.

The second part of the film, “Prophets,” sees el Topo travelling through the desert with the woman from the monastery. She feeds into his vanity and tells him that he could become truly great if he can defeat the four gunslingers who live in the desert. This sets up the long middle passage of the film, as el Topo faces the four gunslingers one at a time, all of whom are superior to him in skill and each of whom acts as both mentor and nemesis to him, giving him spiritual guidance while also explaining why he cannot defeat them before facing them in a duel. El Topo however defeats each of the gunmen through trickery until he reaches the fourth one, an old man who has abandoned his gun for a butterfly net (that he can catch el Topo’s bullets with) and has sworn off all worldly possessions. He tells el Topo:

Fourth Master: How could you possibly have won? I don’t fight. I have nothing. Even if you’d tricked me, you couldn’t have taken anything from me.

El Topo: Yes. I could have taken your life.

Fourth Master: My life? It means nothing to me. I’ll show you.

The fourth master then takes el Topo's gun and shoots himself with it. Then, dying in el Topo's arms, he whispers to him, "you lose."

There is a Biblical parallel that can be drawn here to the Tower of Babel. Considered figuratively, the Tower of Babel warns against seeking God in the external world (ie: finding a path to heaven by literally building one to it) and the confusion of languages serves as a reminder that God must be found internally because, since there is no way to communicate outwardly, there is no other direction for them to turn their thoughts. Similarly, el Topo believes he can achieve enlightenment by killing each of the masters, regardless of how he does so and ignores the wisdom they try to pass on to them, except to the extent that he is able take something from each of them as a way of tricking the next gunslinger. When his trickery proves useless against the fourth master and he is unable to kill him he is driven to madness by his failure (and his companions abandon him) until he is found by a group of invalids and taken to a cave, where he presumably spends decades in either meditation, a trance or a coma (his state of mind is never made clear).

We then move to the third part of the film, "Psalms," which reflects a major shift in el Topo's enlightenment. In this sequence he has abandoned any sense of vanity: he shaves his beard and hair and trades his black outfit for monk's robes. He learns that the invalids who rescue him are kept trapped in the cave by the residents of the nearby town and el Topo vows to go to the town and find a way to free them. He brings along a dwarf woman from the cave with him (who, though she is a major character, is not named on screen and is listed in the credits as "Small Woman"). In the town they find a menagerie of decadence: slaves forced to fight to the death with barbed wire boxing gloves and oversexed old women who throw themselves on young men then accuse them of molesting them. Small Woman (Jacqueline Luis) and el Topo degrade themselves by putting on comical street performances to raise money for the excavation, and thus we are treated to the

irony of the mole who seeks a path to the sun by digging into the earth.

Zizek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, talks about action as a repetition, because the first time an act occurs its purpose is misrecognized but leads to the repetition, when the intention of the first act is understood and carried out. Zizek uses the example of Julius Caesar: Caesar consolidated his power, recognizing that it was necessary to save Rome by changing the rule of the country from a republic to a monarchy, but the conspirators of his murder misrecognized the purpose of his power grab but, in murdering the real Caesar, led the way to Augustus (the first symbolic Caesar) who fulfilled the necessity of what Julius Caesar tried to accomplish.⁷ We can see a similar pattern at work here in the narrative of *El Topo*: the first village el Topo tries to save (ironically, one in which everyone is already dead), leads to his downfall, but the second one leads to his betterment. He misrecognizes the first village he encounters as his chance for salvation and falls deeper into temptation and corruption instead, but it is because of his first failure that he is able to see a greater opportunity for salvation in the plight of the invalids in the cave.

If *El Topo* followed Zizek's formula then freeing the invalids from the cave would lead to his salvation and enlightenment. *El Topo*, however, breaks with Zizek's notion that the repetition of the act is when it is successfully carried out. The fourth part of the film, "Apocalypse" begins with the arrival of el Topo's son, who, though he is now a monk himself, intends to kill his father for abandoning him. However, when he confronts his father (who has also since married and impregnated Little Woman) and sees the work he is doing to try to free the invalids he agrees to help and, in another repetition, dons the solid black outfit his father used to wear. But when el Topo frees the invalids from the cave and they try to make their way into the town, the townspeople come out with their weapons and shoot all of them down, thus bringing el Topo's efforts to naught. El Topo, enraged, takes a gun and kills everyone in the town then, in an unmistakable parallel to

the self-immolation of the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc, sets himself on fire in the middle of the street while el Topo's son and Little Woman walk away from the town.

If the repetition of the act is supposed to realize the fulfillment of the original act, or in other words if el Topo's failure to achieve salvation through his efforts to save the first town should have led to his success in the liberation of the second town, then we have here a repetition that runs contrary to that. El Topo fails in his mission and his act of self-immolation seems to play out as more of an act of despair than anything else, as there is no reason to think that he could not have saved the invalids as he had wished to (perhaps he could have led them away from town and taken them into the desert in search of their own Zion). Are we supposed to take away from el Topo's dual failure that any possibility of enlightenment is impossible; that the act of enlightenment, no matter how many times it is repeated, will always end in failure? Is this film then an argument against enlightenment? Jodorowsky's successor to this film, *The Holy Mountain*, is quite clear in its condemnation of contemporary, popularized means of achieving various states of spiritual awareness, but *El Topo* is more ambiguous. And the question becomes even more complicated when we factor in that Jodorowsky's purpose for making the film was, in part, for the sake of his own spiritual journey. He wanted to make *El Topo* and, more importantly, play the role of el Topo himself, so he could tread the path the character follows himself, and so we are then faced with the further challenge of understanding why Jodorowsky would want his own attempt at enlightenment to fail.

Even though *El Topo* doesn't explicitly reference the cultural mindset of the late 1960's, it is heavily steeped in it all the same. This was a time when new forms of spirituality were being actively explored by the counterculture, with idealistic delusions that it would lead to new states-of-mind or states of mind. *El Topo* then, could be seen as working to break this fantasy by de-

glorifying the whole concept of a spiritual journey, making it into something dark, something that is destructive to those who would undertake one. *El Topo* only leaves us with failure and death, but that in itself is the wisdom of the film: it calls into question the very notions of spirituality and enlightenment, challenges the very merits of such belief systems. This, then, is how Jodorowsky springs the sadistic trap on us in this film: by taking the audience on a spiritual journey that would appear to lead to new states of consciousness but comes instead to failure and disillusionment. *The Holy Mountain*, however, takes a different approach to spirituality and comes to a far different destination as a result.

Ascending *The Holy Mountain*

In comparison to *The Holy Mountain*, *El Topo* seems a tame film. With the support of John Lennon and Allan Klein, Jodorowsky was given the opportunity to make a film with resources and a budget beyond anything he had ever had before.⁸ Indeed, part of the difficulty of watching *The Holy Mountain* is that the film is such a relentless assault on the senses that it is easy to become overwhelmed by the spectacle and miss any deeper subtext. With careful consideration though, *The Holy Mountain* can be seen as another spiritual journey, though one that critiques conventional spirituality in a fundamentally different way than *El Topo* and one in which Jodorowsky is not the pilgrim on the expedition but the guide.

The film's prologue provides the thematic context of the entire film. With a Buddhist monk's chant on the soundtrack we see a man whom we will come to know as The Alchemist (Alejandro Jodorowsky) in a room with two women – identical twins – who are regaled in fancy dresses, makeup and salon hair. Slowly and methodically, the Alchemist removes all of their accouterments – he wipes off their makeup, removes their press on nails, shaves their heads and

removes their dresses, until they are left naked and unburdened of their materialistic desires. *The Holy Mountain* is a film with no traditional narrative arc to it, in fact, there is hardly anything of a narrative at all (what plot the film has takes up very little screen time) but this process of purification can be more easily seen as being the foundation of the film's structure. *The Holy Mountain* is not divided into segments, as *El Topo* was, but we can still discern a three-act structure to the film.

The first act begins with the introduction of the Thief (Horacio Salinas) who we first see passed out in a ditch in a crucifix pose, covered in flies and urinating himself. Jodorowsky wastes no time jumping into the desecration of religious imagery. The Thief is awoken by a limbless man (uncredited) and a group of naked children (recall the dual interpretation of the naked child from *El Topo*) who wake him by hanging him on a cross and throwing rocks at him. One thing to note in this sequence is the procession of symbols Jodorowsky presents to us. There is the obvious one of the crucifixion but we also see the limbless man approach with a tarot card strapped to his back and pluck a white rose from the Thief's palm. The rose plucked from the hand has a vague connotation of stigmata to it, but Ben Cobb in *Anarchy and Alchemy*,⁹ informs us that a white rose is an alchemical symbol for "purity, innocence and unconditional love," as well as symbolizing the initiation of new members into the alchemical world.¹⁰ Cobb also informs us that the tarot card on the back of the limbless man "identifies him as an agent of some grand mechanism."¹¹

I have already asserted that Jodorowsky is perhaps the most symbol-obsessed director in film history and while we see extensive use of them in *El Topo*, in *The Holy Mountain* they are used so extensively as to become as overwhelming to the viewer as the film's sex, nudity and violence. And while some, like the crucifixion, are obvious, even in the heyday of New-Age mysticism Jodorowsky is setting his expectations rather high if he expects his audience to know

the meanings of tarot cards and the alchemical significance of white roses. However, I would suggest that, while an exhaustive analysis of the film's many symbols would most likely yield some fruitful understanding of the film, we can take an easier approach and recognize the value of unrecognizable symbols towards the film's ideas on spirituality, which is to say that a lack of understanding actually holds value.

After waking up, the Thief and the limbless man set off together on an excursion through an unnamed city. We see soldiers ruthlessly mowing down student protesters in the streets but birds fly from their bullet wounds as buses full of middle age, middle class American tourists disembark to get their photos taken with the executioners and corpses (one particularly memorable moment has one of the soldiers deciding to have sex with one of the American women, who gladly consents and smiles for the camera as the husband takes pictures of the two of them going at it) while a deranged military cult marches through the streets with skinned rabbits nailed to crucifixes. We also see a range of blasphemous acts, including an animalistic bishop who speaks only in grunts sleeping in bed with a statue of Christ and a group of mostly naked women praying at an altar to the Virgin Mary (one of whom falls in love with the thief and has a companion chimpanzee for reasons that are never explained beyond a vague suggestion that the chimpanzee is a similar companion for her that the limbless man is for the thief). In short, Jodorowsky is careful to ensure that all seven of the deadly sins are on display here as well as many of the venial sins.

The first act in fact serves no real function aside from presenting us with a world overrun by debauchery and decadence and, outside of the context of the rest of the film, can seem like little more than exploitative gratuity. But this sequence, though perhaps far longer than it needs to be, is essential to Jodorowsky's idea of enlightenment. Interestingly, where most films become increasingly gratuitous as they progress, *The Holy Mountain* actually becomes less so, with the

long first act serving as the high (low?) point of the film's depravity. It is also worth noting that, while there is a great deal of satire to be found in this film (especially in the second act), much of the first act doesn't even reach the level of satire. Jodorowsky wants the audience to wallow in the filth of Western culture, stripped of any real philosophical adornments.

The second act begins when the thief encounters a tower with a single window at the top. From the window a hook with a bag of gold on it is lowered to the crowd, where a man at the bottom takes it and replaces it with a plate of food. The thief, driven by greed, abandons his limbless companion and grabs onto the hook and is raised to the window (the symbolism of him rising above the decadence of the city is precisely as obvious as it appears). Inside is the Alchemist who, after a brief exchange, takes on the thief as a pupil.

The scenes that follow are among the most obfuscating in the film. They consist of a series of rituals the Alchemist takes the thief through that do not appear to be drawn from any major religion and for which even Cobb provides no explanation, which suggests they are purely of Jodorowsky's invention. For example, one such lesson has the Alchemist present the thief with a stone pillar and give him an axe, instructing him to break the stone. When the thief fails to do so after striking it repeatedly, the Alchemist takes the axe, strikes it on the top of the pillar, and it shatters, revealing a glass sphere, which the Alchemist takes and tells the thief, "This stone has a soul formed by the work of millions of years."

To try to analyze the symbolism at work here and in the many other scenes that accompany it in this act would quickly prove tedious and futile, but there is a legitimate case to be made for focusing not on what they mean but on why we are witnessing them. The scenes become more comprehensible when we consider them simply as actions, which is to say when we consider the significance of the simple fact that we are witnessing the motions of these rituals. Nearly every

major religion features complex and often meaningless rituals whose purpose is not in understanding why but simply in the doing. Many Buddhist mantras have no signified but instead are meaningless sounds whose repetition works to help clear the mind: their significance is in the act of chanting itself. In presenting us with nonexistent religious rituals, Jodorowsky makes us aware of the actions (we would not think twice if he showed us nuns in prayer, even though praying in Latin – a language few understand anymore – serves a similar function as a mantra) at the same time that this is also one of the more subtle rejections of conventional religion in the film, since the invented rituals tie in with an ongoing theme we see in the film of rejecting mainstream religion as a path to enlightenment. The endless parade of symbols, should you not wish to make the effort to interpret them all, can serve the same function: simply as images whose significance lies in not knowing what they mean.

However, while Jodorowsky treats these fictitious rituals of his with great reverence, he also blasphemes nearly every major religion in the world with this film at the same. Many of his rituals are rooted in more traditional religious rituals but he tends to alter them in ways that insult their intentions. For example, when turning the Thief's excrement into gold, the Alchemist first wraps his hands and arms in strips of paper with words on them – a clear parallel to the Jewish practice of wrapping oneself in the text of the Torah before performing certain rituals, though to associate such a ritual with excrement is blasphemous. In essence, Jodorowsky walks every path of spirituality but at the same time treads none of them. It is also possible that we could see *The Holy Mountain* as a counterpoint to *El Topo*: where the latter shows us a path to enlightenment that ends in failure, *The Holy Mountain* gives us one that succeeds only because the characters shrug off all traditional and contemporary notions of achieving enlightenment and also, in another departure from *El Topo*, more directly satirizes the culture the film comes out of.

Perhaps the most celebrated sequence of the film comes after the Alchemist has taught the Thief much of what he needs to know. He explains that they will have a number of companions on their journey, “thieves like you, but on another level. They are the most powerful people on the planet, industrialists and politicians.” What follows is a series of vignettes as we are introduced to all seven of them one at a time. Each of them is connected to one of the planets (Venus through Pluto with none representing Earth¹²) and Jodorowsky weaves quite an intricate connection between the eight thieves and the god to which each of their planets corresponds. At first the connections are obvious: Fon (Juan Ferrara) represents Venus and he heads a massive beauty and fashion empire while Isla (Adriana Page) represents Mars and is an arms manufacturer (hopefully the reversal of the traditional gender roles has not escaped the reader) but as we move further out in the solar system the connections become more esoteric. Understanding Klen’s (Burt Kleiner) connection to Jupiter requires the viewer to recall that Jupiter, in Roman mythology, was often associated with merrymaking¹³ and Klen is a manufacturer of art and sex toys, while the children’s toymaker Sel (Valerie Jodorowsky) represents Saturn, who was the father of the Gods. Berg (Nicky Nichola) is a financial advisor to the President (which president is not made clear but there are obvious connotations of a generic Latin American dictator), but Cobb suggests his celestial connection is not through his work, as it is with the others, but through his relationship to his mother, which is the focus of his vignette, as Uranus was the son of Gaia.¹⁴ Axon (Richard Rutowsky) is Neptune and chief of police (as well as the instigator of the suppression of the student rebellion we witness early in the film) and Cobb informs us that modern astrologers associate Neptune with illusion and deception, which can be seen as representative of a man who ostensibly upholds justice but in reality is a ruthless suppressor of it.¹⁵ Lut (Luis Loveli) is a Real Estate mogul and representative of Pluto, which is perhaps not quite as esoteric as some of the other

thieves, as there is a certain twisted logic in having a man who designs apartments for the working class (the focus of his vignette) represented by the god of the underworld. In his narrative he is creating a “revolutionary” set of apartments for the working class man, which are quite literally nothing but coffins suspended in towers that would be built in huge blocks.

In addition to the rather novel vignette structure, this sequence is notable for its heavy satire, which is somewhat atypical of Jodorowsky. We do see some elements of satire elsewhere in *The Holy Mountain*, but through the whole of Jodorowsky’s work satire is something he is rarely inclined to engage in.

To consider a couple of examples, the first thief we are introduced to, Fon (Venus), is in charge of a beauty empire run by his father, who is deaf, blind and mute and makes executive decisions by sticking his finger into the vagina of his wife’s mummified corpse, giving a yes if it is wet and a no if it is dry (one imagines his father must be a rather negative person). They sell prosthetic faces and muscles that allow the wearer to look however they want and have pioneered animatronic technology that allows people to present themselves as they wish in death, a process Fon demonstrates by having a dead priest give a blessing and a dead stripper perform an erotic dance. Aside from the undeniably original presentation, it is a fairly standard critique of fashion: emphasizing vanity and superficiality and run by a man who is literally blind, deaf and out of touch with the world.

The satire generally runs on this level but some set pieces are a little more creative in their satire. In Klen’s (Jupiter) sequence, after taking us on a tour of the factory where he manufactures avant-garde art (which he mass produces by having workers dip their butts in paint and rub them on canvases) he introduces us to his newest invention: a giant cubic box with a vaguely vaginal opening on the front that is designed to test how good a lover someone is (which he never names

but we can actually learn from the song list for the film's soundtrack is called the Fuck Box). Klen explains: "We created a love machine. To make it live the spectator has to work with it, guide it, receive it, give himself in the act of love." Klen first has his chauffeur demonstrate how it works by handing him what can only be adequately described as a giant electro-magnetic dildo:

Klen: with this electronic rod, he will rub its mechanical vagina. The skill of the spectator will determine the machine's ability to reach a climax.

The chauffeur tries to force the rod into the machine, which causes it to vibrate slightly but little else. Klen takes the rod and hands the rod over to his mistress:

Klen: My chauffeur is a bad lover. He didn't know how to satisfy it. But this woman, I know her techniques very well, will produce the electronic orgasm.

The woman approaches the box more gently and as she does so, it begins to unfold and expand to fill the room, emitting a series of electronic beeps that grow louder and more intense until a baby robot drops from between its legs, which the mother robot begins to cradle in its arms while singing a digital lullaby.

Beneath the spectacle of this scene is a critique of humanity's relationship with technology, but one with a more original approach to it. Rather than a tiresome condemnation that boils down to "technology is bad," Jodorowsky skewers our "love affair" with technology by portraying it in a literal light, with an implication that it is a cyclical process (perhaps the baby Fuck Box will prove to be a more streamlined design with better features). However, what cannot be separated from either of the examples given (or the myriad others in this sequence) is the manner in which they are presented. While Jodorowsky's critique of the superficiality of fashion may be a clichéd criticism, his presentation of it is anything but. And the presentation is not mere window dressing: given how tiresome it is to critique fashion as superficial, presenting the idea in an entirely new

manner has a way of refreshing the message for us: forcing us to reconsider an argument we would otherwise have become deaf to.

The end of the vignettes brings us to the third act and sees the pace of the film slow down, as it is from here on that the Alchemist takes them (as well as the thief and the Written Woman) through a spiritual cleansing so that they can ascend Lotus Mountain¹⁶ and overthrow the gods who rule the universe from its peak and take their place. Like with the Alchemist and the thief, this act is rife with empty symbolic rituals, much of them entirely of Jodorowsky's invention. To give one brief example: the Alchemist has the nine pilgrims look at their reflection in a bucket of water so they can look at the tenth member of the group who has died; they then hold a funeral and burial for the bucket of water. Others are loosely based on existing religious practices or are so generic they could apply to almost any form of spirituality (such as meditation).¹⁷ These rituals, however, serve much the same function as the ones we witnessed the Alchemist taking the Thief through: stripped of any association with a particular religion, we are supposed to see the acts in themselves at the same time that they also act in defiance of conventional religion.

In this light, it is also worth noting that, where el Topo's relatively more conventional approach to enlightenment ended in his downfall, here the pilgrims are successful in ascending Lotus Mountain and achieving their goal. It would seem then that Jodorowsky deigned to give us a happy ending this time and yet it is one of the greatest ironies about *The Holy Mountain* that, with all of its shock imagery, possibly the most controversial scene in the film is the finale. The Alchemist leaves the pilgrims near the summit to find the rest of the way on their own. When they reach the summit they find a stone table with hooded figures seated around it. The pilgrims pounce on the figures but discover all of them are dummies except for one, who is revealed to be the

Alchemist who, upon his unmasking, sticks his tongue out and thumbs his nose at them while they all laugh together. He bids them sit:

The Alchemist: Sit down. I promised you the great secret and I will not disappoint you. Is this the end of our adventure? Nothing has an end. We came in search of the secret of immortality, to be like gods and here we are; mortals, more human than ever. If we have not obtained immortality, at least we have obtained reality. We began in a fairytale and we came to life but...Is this life reality? No! It is a film! Zoom back camera!

The camera then pulls back to reveal the film crew.

The Alchemist: We are images, dreams, photographs. We must not stay here. Prisoners! We shall break the illusion! This is maya!¹⁸ Goodbye to the Holy Mountain. Real life awaits us.

After flipping over the table, the group stands up and leaves the set and the film fades to white. This ending has been condemned by many critics. Jeff Vice complains “that the whole thing is topped off with a final, nose-thumbing, fourth-wall breaking sequence is just infuriating.”¹⁹ James Kendrick is quite dismissive of it as well: “it doesn’t help that the film ends with what is essentially a meta-joke on the audience that only someone from the 19th century would find in any way daring or revelatory.”²⁰ And yet this ending is pivotal to Jodorowsky’s critique of spirituality, the final stroke in his assault on the grand ideological construct of conventional (and unconventional) notions of faith.

We are of course aware that we are watching a film and there are no end of movies that break the fourth wall, to the extent that, while we generally expect them only in certain circumstances (usually comedies and stage adaptations as well as a number of more experimental works – the last of which can certainly accommodate *The Holy Mountain*) they hardly ever come as much of a surprise to us or are much likely to be seen as revelatory. That Jodorowsky makes such a dramatic presentation of his breaching can seem like an insult to the audience’s intelligence: nobody is going to be shocked to find out that they had actually been watching a movie the entire

time, which is the reaction that his ending seems to suggest we are supposed to have. But Jodorowsky (who, at this point, has arguably become inextricable from the Alchemist) makes it clear that for any kind of enlightenment to take place, all illusion must be dispelled, including the illusion that he created for us (there is a notably cryptic double meaning in his last line: “Goodbye to the Holy Mountain. Real life awaits us,” as “the Holy Mountain” could be interpreted as referring to both the mountain they stand upon and the film we have just finished watching). We cannot even trust the journey that he took us on. Thus does the film critique not only organized religion but the chaos of the counterculture as well, the actors dispersing in different directions seems to imply that we are on our own to find our way in the world. If the counterculture of the 60’s and 70’s is indeed the *mélange* of chaos that Braunstein and Doyle suggest it is then Jodorowsky’s ending gives us a path by which to escape it. Coming out of a culture in which even a subversion of the major religions usually comes in the form of adherence to smaller ones, this is quite a radical statement and while Jodorowsky’s breaking of the fourth wall at the end may seem cheap and pedantic, some reflection upon the why of it brings us to something much deeper.

Compared to *El Topo*, it may not seem like Jodorowsky is springing the sadistic trap here, as *The Holy Mountain* has what can reasonably be called a happy ending. It is indeed a less severe trap he has set here but one that, if successfully sprung, should force a rethinking of the audience’s spiritual ideology no matter what that ideology is. A film that condemns mainstream religion while reaffirming the righteousness of the audience’s alternative beliefs would have been nothing more than self-indulgent ego-stroking. Ideologically speaking it would have been no better than a film that upheld the status quo that people who embraced Jodorowsky’s films were rebelling against. Jodorowsky had the daring to go one step further: to create a film that challenged all notions of spirituality regardless of what they were.

Conclusion

It is strange to think that even with all of their graphic violence, sexuality and other shock images, that the most subversive thing about Jodorowsky's films is their treatment of spirituality. And yet between these two films Jodorowsky undermines popular and trendy notions of faith so completely that the audience is left with no ground on which to stand. This undermining of something that is so, for lack of a better word, sacred to most people, is then Jodorowsky's way of springing the sadistic trap on us, of bringing us along on this spiritual journey only to bring us to the conclusion that enlightenment is a journey that either ends in failure or can only be achieved by shunning the path that most people try to take with it. However, by being so thorough in undermining our thoughts on faith Jodorowsky is hoping to force everyone in the audience to reevaluate their beliefs and why they believe them. It is his way of saying that no matter what you believe you are probably wrong. And yet *The Holy Mountain* at least leaves us on a positive note because, despite his critique of nearly every form of spirituality, he also shows us a film in which even the most vile people on earth are able to attain enlightenment, thus showing us that no one is beyond redemption.

¹ Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, "Historicizing the American Counterculture of the 1960's and 70's." from *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960's and 70's*. ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (Routledge, Madison: 2002), 2-3, accessed 31 August 2015.

² Braunstein and Doyle, 8

³ Slavoj Zizek, "In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large," *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan but Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, Ed. Slavoj Zizek (Verso, Brooklyn: 2010), 222-3

⁴ Cobb informs us that Jodorowsky played the lead in part because he wanted to undertake the character's spiritual transformation for the sake of his own enlightenment but also because he intended to put the lead through torments

that he could not legally have asked any other actor to endure and so he had no choice but to take them on himself. Ben Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy: The Films of Alejandro Jodorowsky*. (Creation Books: New York, 2007).

⁵ This fear stemmed from an early childhood experience where his father sent him to the local jail with a note which he handed to a police officer who, upon reading it, threw the young Alfred in one of the cells for several hours. It turns out the note had instructed the officer to do this, as it had been the hope of Hitchcock's father that this would deter him from any temptation to commit crimes when in reality the experience scarred Hitchcock for life.

⁶ Zizek, "In His Bold Gaze," 217.

⁷ Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (Verso, Brooklyn: 2008), 63-4.

⁸ Which still only amounted to \$750,000.

⁹ To date the only book-length work on Jodorowsky's films, though it is more concerned with biography and plot summary than analysis, though Cobb's exhaustive breakdown of the symbols Jodorowsky uses are quite useful.

¹⁰ Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy*, 130.

¹¹ Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy*, 130.

¹² In addition to the eight thieves, there are three others who travel with them on the journey that makes up the last act of the film: the Alchemist, the thief and a companion of the Alchemist billed as The Written Woman (Ramona Saunders), who is heavily tattooed (in esoteric religious/new age symbols of course) and rarely does more than stand around and be almost completely naked. It is unclear which celestial bodies these three are supposed to correspond with. Presumably the Alchemist, as the central figure and guiding light, would be the Sun but if the Written Woman and the thief are supposed to correspond with Mercury and Earth (or possibly the Moon), it is never made clear who corresponds with which celestial body and what their connection to it might be.

¹³ Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy*, 146-147.

¹⁴ Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy*, 151.

¹⁵ Cobb, *Anarchy and Alchemy*, 153.

¹⁶ A place of Jodorowsky's invention but he compares it in a speech to several other "holy mountains" including Mount Ko-tso Shan of the Taoist tradition, the Karakorum of the Himalayas and the Rosicrucian Mountain. However, a Google search reveals that every single one of these is also a trick of Jodorowsky's: they either don't exist at all (the Rosicrucian Mountain) or are only loosely based on real places (the Karakoram, which is a mountain range in Tibet that forms part of the Himalayas and are no more sacred than any other mountain).

¹⁷ With this in mind, it is actually a point of some significance that in the deleted scenes on the DVD we learn there was to be an additional scene in this act where the Alchemist was to have them practice Sufi Whirling. He cites technical reasons for cutting the scene but this would have made it the only ritual they undertook that was directly pulled from a major religion.

¹⁸ Cobb informs us that maya "is the Hindu philosophy of illusion, specifically in reference to the unreality of the material world." (Cobb 2007, 170)

¹⁹ Jeff Vice, "Film Review: Holy Mountain Thumbs Nose at Staid Audience," Deseretnews.com (2011), accessed 22 July 2013.

²⁰ James Kendrick, "Holy Mountain," review of *The Holy Mountain* (2011) <http://www.qnetwork.com/index.php?page=review&id=2560>, accessed 22 July 2013

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